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MAN HUNT FOR THE MOUNTED

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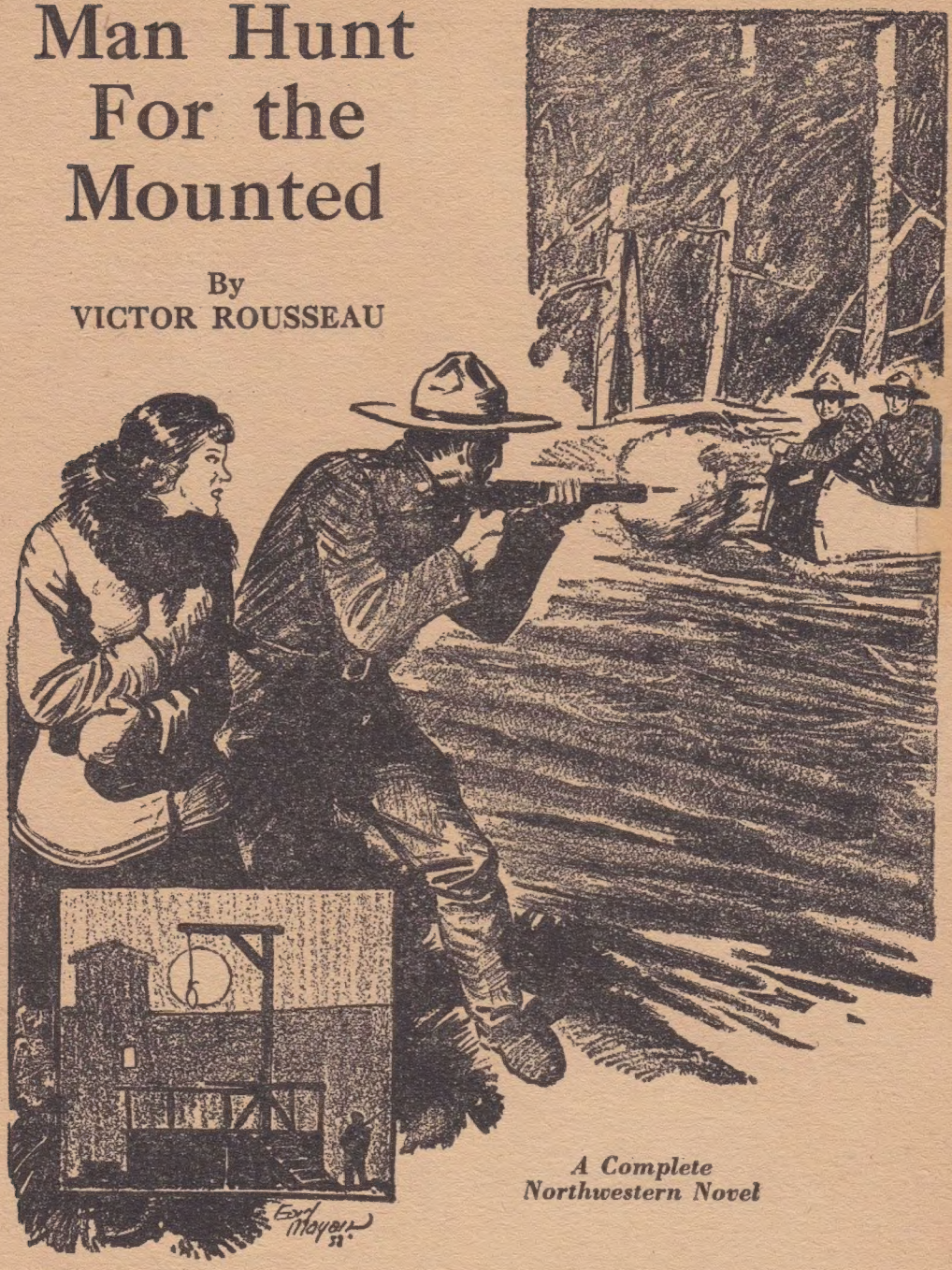
VICTOR ROUSSEAU



A Complete Northwestern Novel

Year after year Corporal Roscoe hung grimly to the twisting Cain trail, spurred by the unrelenting code of the Royal Mounted—*"Get your man!"*

FROM where he had camped the night before without a fire, so that neither flame nor smoke might betray his presence, Corporal Jim Roscoe of the Royal Mounted could look down the slope of the snow toward the shack at the end of Peace Lake.

All through the day he had patiently lain there, hidden in a clump of dwarf willow. For that shack contained his quarry, as he had every reason to believe from the thin spiral of blue smoke, perceptible only to trained eyes like his own, which crept lazily upward from the hole in the

roof and made a faint haze overhead.

It was the end of one of the grimmest man-hunts in the history of the Force, and it had lasted nearly three years. It had begun with a team of dogs, three months' supplies, and the expectation on the corporal's part of bringing back his quarry before the advent of winter.

But the team of dogs with which Corporal Roscoe had started north had long since died, by accident and starvation. For three years Roscoe had trailed Ralston about the barren reaches of the Northwest, replenishing his scant supply of provisions at traders' shacks or isolated police posts, becoming more and more a nomad, and living with the sole purpose of fulfilling the first law of the Police, "Bring back your man!"

Constable Thomas Ralston, an Englishman of good family, had brutally murdered another Englishman, a mysterious recluse, in a lonely shack, in the hope of discovering a hoard of gold which he was supposed to have washed from a rich placer deposit.

Ralston had subsequently joined the Police, proof positive that he had failed to find this hoard, and it was a year after the murder before the dead man's skeleton was discovered by a patrolling party, so remote was the place where the recluse had lived.

It was the possession of certain effects identified as the property of the dead man that placed the guilt on Ralston. He had been tried, and sentenced to hang. Three days before the date set for his execution he had tunneled his way out of prison.

One might think it simple to evade pursuit in the vast spaces of the North. But one must follow certain definite trails and portages. The epic chase that followed had been like a game of chess, with all the strategy of false trails and tricks of woodcraft.

The first winter Roscoe thought he had Ralston cornered on the Great Fish. He doubled back along the maze of portages between Baker Lake and the Kazan, and summer found the two playing hide-and-seek along the eastern shore of Lake Athabasca. It was a gang of free traders that saved Ralston the next winter. In their gasoline boat he had slipped past Roscoe's camp when the ice went out.

The third winter an Indian advised Roscoe that Joe Camp was running hooch between the Peace and the Hay rivers. He told him that Camp, Ralston, and Pierre Labrecque, the half-breed, were in the shack at the end of Lake Peace. During the ensuing week Roscoe, grimly following the trail, had hardly slept.

Now at last, as he crouched shivering in the cold of evening, Roscoe saw what he had been waiting for. Three figures, hardly distinguishable in the failing light, appeared around the bend of the portage, coming on snow-shoes over the ice. They entered the cabin. And then the watcher saw the tiny flicker of a light spring up within.

Three figures! That third made his hopes almost a certainty. It meant that Ralston was one of them. In another hour, when it had grown dark, the long pursuit would be at an end.

Roscoe arose, shivering as much from anticipation as from the cold, for the finish of his three years' chase could hardly leave him unmoved. He adjusted his parka, fidgeted with the thongs of his snowshoes, ascertained that his Colt was fully loaded, and that the catches of the handcuffs were in working order. At last he made his way over the snow in the direction of the shack.

As he drew near it he could hear the drunken shouts of the three men within. They seemed to be engaging in a free-for-all fight, an inevitable result of liquor when three such men are shut up in one another's company throughout a northern winter.

Well, that made the capture easier and Roscoe was in no hurry. He made his way leisurely toward the door. The fighting seemed to have been temporarily suspended and he heard Joe Camp speaking.

"Yeah," he jeered, "you tried to double-cross us, but we got you where we want you, Ralston. You come across with that gold or you won't never leave this part of the country alive. You know where that feller hid it, and you don't pull no wool over our eyes. Jest a tip from us and that feller Roscoe will know where to find you."

"*Oui, oui,* zat's so!" came the jeering voice of the half-breed, Labrecque. "You no get away from Roscoe, Ralston. Maybe you hang in jail before the summer come if you don't come across with it."

"Wrong again, the pair of you," came

Ralston's clearly modulated English accents. "For a fairly intelligent man, Joe, your diagnoses are really off the trail, you know. Roscoe is following blind trail up the Hay at the present moment, and I'll be in England with the spring, punting up the Thames and picking primroses."

A scornful bellow from Joe Camp came in answer.

"Putting up at my club and stepping into the family inheritance and you'll be nothing more than a rather unsavory memory, Joe. As for that gold, I've told you time and again I couldn't find it. You fools, if I'd found it, would I have joined the Police and slaved two years in barracks?"

"Sure you would because you was waiting for your chance to get away with that gold you buried," blustered Joe Camp. "When that feller Roscoe had you cornered east of Lake Athabasca, you told us there'd be gold for the picking if we'd help you make your getaway. And we fell for it.

"We got you away, and you been stalling ever since. You're a clever feller, Ralston, but it don't go down with Pierre and me, and you're going to take us where you hid that gold, or you don't leave Canada alive."

"By gar, zat's the truth, Meester Ralston!" shouted the half-breed. "I guess you fooled us long enough. Everybody knowed zat crazy Englishman had found a mine and was washing there two, t'ree years, and nobody never found the gold. You're going to cough up, Meester Ralston."

"Wrong, wrong," shouted Ralston scornfully. "Here's where we part company, Joe and Pierre, and I guess you know better than to try to stop me. I'm kissing Canada goodbye. I'm on my way to England now, and you can hunt for that gold yourselves. When I'm taking my ease I'll laugh to think of you fellows sweating here and running your dirty hooch up and down these trails."

"I guess not, Ralston," said Corporal Roscoe quietly, as he pushed the door open, and showed himself in the entrance. "Hands up, everybody, wrists together, and touching finger-tips."

The heavy police revolver emphasized the command.

For an instant a comical consternation succeeded the angry snarling of the three. Roscoe saw the fat, bestial face of Joe Camp, mouth open, eyes widening with apprehension as they fixed themselves upon him. He noted Labrecque's expression of terror, and Ralston's clean-cut features registering stupefaction as his hands went up mechanically above his head.

Roscoe had not reckoned with the half-breed's panther-like quickness. Suddenly a bullet hurtled past his face. Next moment the clubbed weapon struck him a glancing blow. As Roscoe staggered, Joe Camp knocked the lamp over.

Fortunately the revolver butt only grazed his head, stripping off an inch of scalp, and descended with numbing force upon the point of his left shoulder. In the dark Roscoe leaped and grabbed Ralston.

A few moments' savage tussle and the corporal succeeded in putting his prisoner to sleep with a lucky blow on the head. Joe Camp and Labrecque were rolling over and over, locked in each other's arms, each under the impression that he had possession of Roscoe. By the time they had realized their error, Roscoe had the advantage.

The overturned lamp had set fire to the hut, which was beginning to blaze. Labrecque fired again at the corporal as he sprang to his feet, aiming at his silhouette against the blaze. He missed a second time. Roscoe's bullet, fired simultaneously, struck the half-breed in the hand, completely penetrating it and driving the splintered bones into the flesh.

Labrecque's revolver dropped to the floor. With a howl of agony Labrecque fled into the darkness, wringing the injured member. He continued howling until the sounds of the pain-crazed man died away in the distance.

That left only Joe Camp. The fat outlaw had no stomach for fighting. But now Roscoe stood between him and the door. Lowering his head, he charged him like a battering-ram, his impetus sending them both sprawling upon the snow without. Joe Camp, a mass of fat and flabby muscle, seized Roscoe in a grip of sheer terror that bade fair to strangle the life out of him.

Unable to reach his gun, Roscoe managed to get the handcuffs out of his pocket, an old-fashioned type connected by a short, stout chain of forged steel. Gripping one cuff, he brought down the other on Joe Camp's head. With a coughing grunt,

the hooch-runner subsided in the snow.

Roscoe staggered to his feet. His first act was to re-enter the hut, which was now a mass of flames, and carry out Ralston's unconscious body. Next he dragged the fat hooch-runner to safety out of the reach of the flames. Joe Camp was breathing normally, and already showed signs of returning consciousness. The heat of the fire would keep him from freezing until he was able to shift for himself.

Roscoe gathered up the revolver Labrecque had dropped and found another on Camp. He had a strong suspicion that after the encounter, and with their injuries, Joe Camp and Pierre Labrecque would not be inclined to risk their lives by any attempt to follow and rescue Ralston.

He hoisted Ralston upon his shoulders and carried him back to the place where he had camped. Half an hour later Ralston opened his eyes under the stars. He glared at Roscoe.

"Got me, did you?" he sneered.

"Looks that way, Ralston," answered the corporal. "Want me to read the warrant to you?"

"No damn you!" answered the fugitive.

"There'll be plenty of time on the journey," said the policeman. "We've got a long trail before us. Soon as you feel better we'll be starting. In the meantime, just put your wrists out."

The handcuffs snapped on Ralston's wrists.

II

ROSCOE'S term of service in the Royal Mounted had expired more than a year before, and he did not intend to rejoin. A silent man by nature, and grown more solitary by reason of the long patrols in the wilderness, he had pre-empted a little valley to which he planned to retire and breed cattle after he had brought back his man.

It was some way off the main northward trail, and had apparently been visited by only one white man, the recluse who had been murdered for his gold. Roscoe had pre-empted the valley before he discovered the recluse's shack under the lee of the next hill. He had been one of the patrol that had discovered the skeleton.

His term had ended, but a job has to be finished, so he had remained on active service. During those three years, as he had learned from an occasional meeting with another man of the Mounted, the service had been totally reorganized.

The old North-West Mounted had become the Royal Mounted and his own detachment no longer existed. Until he reported back, with Ralston, he remained merely a name at Ottawa, an unattached policeman with accumulating arrears of pay, chasing an elusive criminal through the northland.

Corporal Roscoe was correct in his surmise that Camp and Labrecque were not going to risk their lives on behalf of Ralston. He forced his prisoner to start as soon as he had recovered from the concussion of his blow, and having covered nearly a dozen miles by daylight, he felt himself reasonably secure.

It was not an easy matter to convey a prisoner several hundred miles southward to the nearest police post, where Roscoe would deliver him to the authorities. He had to sleep. To prevent Ralston's escaping while he slept, Roscoe was forced to tighten the handcuffs at night and to lash Ralston to a tree with a length of rawhide. When he was awake, however, he allowed his captive a reasonable amount of liberty, having no doubt of his ability to keep the upper hand over him.

The nearest post was Fort Wilson, where a sergeant and two policemen had been stationed during the preceding winter. There existed, however, a Moravian mission about a hundred and fifty miles southward, and about twice that distance from Fort Wilson, on the Athabasca. It was connected with the world by telegraph, and from here Roscoe planned to wire Divisional Headquarters, asking for instructions as to Ralston's disposition.

Roscoe had searched his prisoner and taken a bundle of papers from him. He was surprised to discover that he still carried his service papers. There was also an amount of correspondence from England, mainly from Ralston's sister, Ellen.

Roscoe's duties as sole government representative in the district forced him to glance through these. The letters, which he barely skimmed, were couched in loving terms. It appeared that Ralston had left England when a boy, fifteen years before,

and that the sister, who hardly remembered him, had always idealized him in her mind. She wrote of family reverses, alluding to the death of a father, and hinted several times at coming out to join him. The latest letter was written three years before.

Ralston's attitude was one of sullen defiance. He jeered at Roscoe and the three years' chase he had given him.

"I guess I'll have to cash in, Roscoe," he said. "I'm ready to die. Life's one damn thing after another. After all, I had the fun of killing Rogers. Wish I'd got you, too."

Roscoe let him rave. Nothing the renegade policeman could say to him had the power to ruffle him.

"But you're a fool, Roscoe," Ralston continued. "That gold they were looking for and never found. Well, I've got it cached, and I'd divvy up with you if you weren't such a fool. There's pretty near a hundred thousand dollars' worth. Nice pickings if you say the word, Roscoe. Otherwise it will lie where I cached it till the Judgment Day."

"Roscoe," Ralston said at another time, "I guess you've found out from my letters that I've got a sister over in England. The great servant class, to which you essentially belong, Roscoe, invariably imagines personal letters to be public property. I'd like her not to know. But she's not likely to find out. The government always reports 'death by misadventure' to the next of kin, when it hangs one of its men."

Roscoe had a week's supplies of dried meat, flour, tea, and sugar in his pack. He eked out these provisions with his prisoner, himself subsisting on practically nothing, and on the tenth morning the mission buildings appeared on the flats beside the broad Athabasca.

Roscoe knew the old German priest, Father Holtz, in charge. He found instead, however, a green young German, just out from Europe, knowing hardly a word of English, to assist him in his duties. He opened his eyes wide at the sight of the constable with his prisoner, and managed to convey to Roscoe's mind the idea that Father Holtz had gone out to try to secure some caribou, which had been seen in the vicinity, but would return at sundown.

There was also the word "fraulein," which Roscoe knew meant "miss." This puzzled him for a while, but he came to the conclusion that one of the sisters from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, who often traveled in mid-winter, was stopping at the mission.

Taking his captive with him, Roscoe went into the telegraph office and dispatched a wire to Divisional Headquarters, announcing his capture of Ralston and asking for instructions.

After that followed a dreary wait through the afternoon, Roscoe never for a moment relaxing his vigilance, while Ralston sat sneering beside him, the handcuffs on his wrists. The sun was dipping toward the west when the assistant came to them and began chattering in German and pointing.

Stepping to the door, Roscoe saw Father Holtz and a woman coming toward the mission behind a sledge with four dogs attached. What looked like the body of a caribou was on the sledge.

The woman turned into one of the huts some little distance away, and Father Holtz, having unharnessed the dogs, left the meat on the sledge and came toward them. His eyes lit up with pleasure at the sight of Roscoe, then he looked inquiringly at Ralston, handcuffed upon the seat from which the corporal had just risen.

"That's Ralston," said Roscoe in a low tone. "I'm bringing him down. I sent a wire to Headquarters from—"

But he paused at the look of consternation on the priest's face. Father Holtz seemed struggling with violent emotion. He looked from Roscoe to Ralston, then, taking Roscoe by the arm, led him toward the other.

"I must say what I have to say to both of you," he began, while his features worked violently. "Miss Ellen Ralston is with me at this mission. She has been here since the beginning of the winter, trying to obtain news of her brother. No one would tell her that—"

"That Tom Ralston is a convicted murderer who has cheated the gallows and may do so again," sneered Ralston.

Something that sounded like a German oath burst from the priest's lips.

"You do not understand," he cried. "She is a little thing only twenty. She barely remembers her brother, but she has always

idolized him. He has been like a god to her. And she has come to this country to join him. She is so good, gentlemen," he babbled. "If she knows, it will kill her. Only yesterday she was saying that as soon as the ice goes out and the boats come, she will go farther up the river to try to obtain news of her brother.

"You see, they—everybody told her that he was a member of the police no longer, and has been trapping or mining in the farther North. That is all that anybody has dared to tell her. And she thinks that she will find him, and that they will make their home together. But when she learns the truth she will die. She—she must not learn."

Roscoe, overcome with horror at the situation, was staring into the priest's face. He was thinking that, with Ralston's connivance, he might pretend he was taking him down on a minor charge. But he dared not trust him without the handcuffs. No, that plan would not do.

"We'd best be mushing right away," he said, "before—"

At that moment they saw the young assistant crossing the open space in front of the mission. As he passed the huts the girl emerged, and engaged him in conversation.

"Yes, that is the only thing," said Father Holtz. "She is not likely to suspect anything, and she will not speak to you. She is shy."

The ticking of the machine in the telegraph office came to their ears. Father Holtz made his way quickly inside. He had hardly disappeared from sight when they saw the assistant turn around and point toward them. Simultaneously a startled cry broke from the girl's lips, and she came running toward them.

She stopped in front of them, panting. A little thing, not more than five feet two or three, with pale brown hair and big gray eyes opened wide with wonder and anxiety as she fixed them alternately upon the face of Roscoe and that of Ralston.

"Is—is either of you two gentlemen my brother, Tom Ralston?" she panted. "He, that young man, was telling me that he heard one of you address the other as Ralston."

Roscoe could have killed the fool of a German.

"Please tell me," the girl went on. "My brother—" She was looking at Roscoe now, hope in her eyes. "I'm Ellen Ralston. I came out last autumn to find him. I—"

Father Holtz came quickly out of the telegraph office, a slip of flimsy paper in his hand. His advent distracted Ellen Ralston momentarily. All three turned as the priest came quickly up to them. He handed the slip that he had just scribbled to the corporal.

Roscoe took it and read. It was from Divisional Headquarters, and ran as follows:

"Escort Ralston to Fort Wilson and see that he is detained there until the sentence of the law has been carried into effect. Fort Wilson has been notified to have everything in readiness for the execution upon arrival. Report to Headquarters afterward."

Roscoe crumpled the slip and thrust it into his pocket. He turned back to the girl, whose features reflected her growing alarm.

"Nell," he said, "I'm your brother Tom."

III

HE did not know afterward what impulse had led him to say that. But the situation had become impossible. He knew he could have done nothing else.

And she had flung her arms about his neck and cried and laughed till, fearful of his prisoner's escape, he had had to push her from him. Then she had looked at Ralston again, and seen the handcuffs.

"Who—who is this?" she had gasped.

Roscoe told her that he was a prisoner whom he was taking down on the charge of violating the liquor regulations. And Ralston had looked on with a cynical smile and said nothing.

"Then you are still in the police?" Ellen had inquired. "They told me you had taken your discharge."

Roscoe had explained that he had reenlisted, wondering how it was that the words came so pat from his lips. Then he had told Ellen that they had to be separated for a little longer, while he was taking the prisoner Roscoe down to Divisional Headquarters for selling liquor to the Indians.

"But is that serious crime?" asked Ellen

in wonder. "And do they make you policemen travel in such weather as this, just to arrest a man for selling a little liquor? And must he wear those horrible things on his wrists as if he was a desperate criminal?"

"Well, you see, the Indians are not allowed to have liquor," stammered Roscoe. "And as for the cuffs—why, he might try to escape."

"The cuffs, as our friend calls these metallic implements, are considered an inevitable concomitant of such a condition by minds like that of our friend the corporal," said Ralston, in the hee-haw manner of the stage Englishman.

Ellen looked at him in bewilderment, and Roscoe ground his teeth savagely.

"And what will they do to this poor man?" asked Ellen.

"Oh, just a little fine," jeered Ralston. "They'll tell me to be a good boy and not do it again."

Ellen, as if sensing that there was something more in the situation than appeared, kept looking anxiously from one man to the other. Roscoe's heart was in his mouth throughout the interview, but Ralston had subsided into a surly silence.

"And are you starting today?" asked the girl.

"Right away, as soon as we've had something to eat," said Roscoe. "The quicker it's over, the sooner I—I shall be back here. Father Holtz will take good care of you," he added as the priest, who had been in the house, appeared again, looking anxiously at the little group.

"And how long will that be, Tom?"

"Oh, you can look for me inside of a month," Roscoe answered.

"It seems dreadful that we should have to be parted for a whole month, just when we have found each other," sighed Ellen. "But I am so thankful that I have found you, Tom, dear." Her mouth quivered. "I was afraid that—that I should never find you, and nobody seemed to want to tell me anything about you somehow."

"Ralston, I've put up some supplies for you," said Father Holtz, "and supper's ready. You'd best come now, if you're meaning to start this evening."

"You couldn't wait till morning?" asked Ellen eagerly.

But she said nothing when Roscoe told her that would be impossible. They went in to their meal of sourdough and caribou steak. While he ate Roscoe had to listen to the girl's description of life at home, and details about people who were only names that he had seen in her letters to her brother. All the while Ralston listened and leered at Ellen and grinned cynically at Roscoe.

When the hurried meal was finished, Roscoe shouldered his pack with the supplies that the priest had put up for him. The young fool of a German, who had been the cause of the dilemma, had been kept out of the way, for which Roscoe was devoutly grateful. Ellen clung to Roscoe and kissed him fondly.

"Come back, Tom, safe and sound," she said. "I shall be so anxious about you."

She glanced at Ralston.

"Please don't keep this poor man's handcuffs too tight," she said, and Ralston leered again.

"Goodbye, goodbye," shouted the priest. "Keep away from any of the Indian camps," he warned Roscoe. "There's a plague of smallpox in the district. I'll take good care of your sister. Goodbye, my boy, and God be with you."

They took up the trail, Ralston leering to the last. But Roscoe was conscious of something almost like a measure of gratitude to his prisoner that he had not betrayed himself to Ellen.

They camped that night a few miles out of the settlement. The worst part of their journey still lay before them, the passage of the Desolation range, culminating in Little Wolf pass, at an altitude of some two thousand feet. It was not difficult to negotiate in mid-winter, but dangerous now in late March, when the snow was soft, and avalanches were apt to start. That night Ralston taunted Roscoe with all the invective that he had at ready command.

"Quite sweet on that little sister of mine, aren't you, Roscoe?" he jeered. "Pretty little thing she is, too. I respect your taste, Roscoe. I'd have thought it would have run along more plebeian lines."

For the first time Roscoe lost his self-control.

"Damn you, shut up!" he shouted. "If you've got any instincts of a man hidden away somewhere in you, shut up and keep quiet."

Ralston chuckled.

"Got under your hide there, Roscoe," he went on. "Seems as if my guesses was correct. Roscoe, I'm going to have an annoying, perhaps a disturbing, time when I get to Fort Wilson. But I don't envy you the job you're going to have explaining things to her. Or perhaps," he went on, "you'll decide, having my letters and all, that it might be as well to let her think you're me. Only in that case you won't be able to marry her, you know."

Roscoe lay still, chewing the cud of his bitterness. Who would have the task of telling Ellen the truth? And would she ever forgive him for having deceived her, and not having let her know that Ralston was the brother whom she had traveled so many thousand miles to see?

Ralston said nothing more, but Roscoe could hear him chuckling now and again as he lay handcuffed and strapped to the tree to which the corporal had bound him. Ralston was going down to his death, but he had Roscoe at his mercy.

Roscoe hardly slept. At the first break of dawn he was up, shivering and preparing coffee. Ralston was still asleep. What kind of man was this that could sleep in the shadow of the gallows? He awoke when coffee was ready and sat up, stretching out his wrists to have them freed of the handcuffs.

"Little sister begged you not to fasten this poor man's cuffs too tight," he leered.

Roscoe, with compressed lips, snapped back the lock.

"Hurry up, Ralston," he said curtly. "We've got to get through Little Wolf pass by evening."

Ralston ate, grinning at his own thoughts. When he was through, Roscoe fastened his pack on his back, and the two started off, Ralston a little in the lead as always. Roscoe never relaxed his vigilance or allowed the other to come too near. His loaded gun, in his unfastened holster, was ever at his finger-tips. Ralston had thus far made no move to gain his freedom, but Roscoe maintained his perpetual watch. The strain was telling on him, and his nerves were rasped raw by the events of the day before. To add to this, a sudden storm sprang up out of the west, increasing as the day wore on.

Toward mid-afternoon they were threading the trail over the Desolations. Beyond that ridge, not very high or arduous except at that particular season, lay comparatively level land. They would strike the Athabasca again and follow its course to their destination.

The snow lay deep, and on the slopes of the mountains the wind blew it into their faces with hurricane force. As the day waned it became almost impossible for Roscoe to observe his bearings and keep watch on Ralston, too. A little short of the pass Roscoe hailed Ralston, a dim figure in the snow swirls.

"Halt!" he rasped. "Halt, Ralston, or I'll shoot!"

Ralston stopped and Roscoe toiled up to him.

"I've told you before to keep your proper distance ahead," shouted the corporal. "Think you're going to put one over on me like that?"

Ralston snickered.

"Guess your nerves are frayed raw, Corporal," he taunted him. "Still worrying over little sister?"

Roscoe smothered an oath.

"Just put your hands above your head, Ralston," he ordered. "I'm going to fasten us together. I'm not taking any chances with you on these slopes."

Ralston snickered again, but said nothing. His silence, though, was more maddening than any taunt. Holding his prisoner covered with his Colt, Roscoe quickly looped the rawhide about both their bodies, allowing a distance of about twenty feet between them.

"Now mush, Ralston," the corporal ordered.

Ralston started off again. The summit of the pass loomed ahead of them, not far away, but it was near sundown, so far as could be guessed through the swirling blizzard, and growing dark fast. They must hurry to find shelter on the other side where they would be comparatively free from the wind. Ralston struggled on, Roscoe almost upon his heels. He wondered whether it was his nerves, or some true presentiment that Ralston was planning to play some trick on him. Suddenly he stopped.

"We're off the trail," he announced.

"Looks that way," said Ralston.

What they had thought the trail proved

now to be a blind passage stopping almost at the crest of the divide. Peering out through the snow, they saw a vertical cliff before them, extending around to their left. On the right there was a vast slope of snow, studded with projecting rocks. Behind them was the long slope up which they had toiled, pitted with two irregular lines of footprints.

"Trail's over there," said Ralston, indicating a break in the serrated crest of the summit.

"Why the devil didn't you say we were wrong?" Roscoe shouted.

"I thought you knew so much, Corporal," answered Ralston, with mock humility, "and I wasn't sure myself."

"Mush back!" snapped Roscoe.

Ralston turned. Suddenly a warning cry broke from his lips. From the slope above a vast field of snow seemed suddenly to detach itself and come gliding toward them with rapidly increasing speed. As it advanced it seemed to rear itself like a gigantic wave. One moment the two men cowered on the slope of Little Wolf pass. The next a hundred tons of snow had swept them into nothingness.

IV

ROSCOE felt himself sucked up into the maw of the avalanche which enveloped him like a soft, cold cloud, sweeping him away. In front of him lay the precipice toward which he was being hurried with irresistible impetus. Mentally he calcuated that drop in terms of feet and impact. He wondered whether it was true that men flung from a height heard but never felt the shock of the descent. And he awaited what seemed the inevitable end.

Then he realized that the movement had stopped. The snow still enveloped him, but he could breathe through the dry particles and underneath him he felt the solid ground.

For an instant it flashed through his brain that he had fallen, lost consciousness, and was now lying at the bottom of the gorge. But he quickly discovered that he was able to move his arms and legs. Throwing out the former, he encountered a jagged rock, around which he flung them, bracing his body against it.

Then, with a struggle, he succeeded in dislodging the pile of snow above him. And to his infinite joy and relief he saw the welcome face of the moon riding through the sky overhead.

Quickly he took his bearings. He soon discovered that he was lying, clasping the rock, almost upon the edge of the precipice. He could see down into those dizzy depths beneath him. The dry, powdery snow was heaped up in billowing masses all about him, the remnant that had been held by the rocky ledge after the bulk of the avalanche had fallen over the gorge. Above him was a bare tract of mountainside, denuded of snow.

Then Roscoe made another discovery. Something was looped about one arm, cutting into and bruising it. It was a rope. But how did a rope come to be about his arm? His mind, still benumbled by the shock of the descent, went searching back. Something very important was connected with that rope which he could not afford to forget. Something important. . . . Ralston!

With that, memory became complete again. Ralston had been at the other end of that rope and Ralston must be lying at the bottom of the ravine, buried under tons of snow. He would have to go back without his man after that three years' chase.

True, under such circumstances he would be exonerated. No policeman was expected to prove stronger than the forces of nature. But to return without his man meant an undefinable stigma in the Force, where "Get your man!" was the first law, written and unwritten.

Still, perhaps when day dawned, it might be possible in some way to descend the precipice and retrieve Ralston's body. If not, he would wait till the melting of the snows in April.

As he tugged at the rope to free his arm, Roscoe realized that the other end was caught in something. Half-relaxing his hold of the rock, he crawled a few inches to the edge of the precipice. He pulled again.

And then he saw Ralston lying on a narrow ledge and clinging to a small sapling that protruded from that six-inch shelf, with the rope still fastened about his body.

"Ralston!" he called.

"Hello, Roscoe, old scout! Thought you were dead!" came up to him.

"Are you hurt, Ralston?"

"Don't think so. How are you, Roscoe?"

"I'm all right. Can you hold on for a few minutes? I think I can pull you up from there. The rope's not frayed at your end, is it?"

"No," answered Ralston, "the rope's not frayed."

"Loop it around you, Ralston, and I'll wind it around this rock. I can get you up."

"Just hold your horses, Roscoe." Ralston's sardonic chuckle came up over the ledge. "I'm not in such a hurry as you seem to think I am."

"What d'you mean, Ralston?"

"Meaning that, if it's all the same to you, Roscoe, or if it isn't, I'd rather lie here till I get tired holding this rock and let myself go, rather do that than go down to Fort Wilson to be hanged."

Roscoe was silent. Without Ralston's aid he knew it would be impossible to haul him over the edge of the precipice, and from Ralston's point of view he could find no fault with the decision.

"Roscoe!" Ralston's voice floated up, bland and insinuating. "That little sister of mine's got money. Not very much, but enough to start two people nicely with a little ranch somewhere in the prairie provinces. How about hauling me up and letting me go, and reporting ex-Constable Ralston captured and killed by an avalanche?"

"Shut up, damn you!"

"It's been done, Roscoe. Every policeman knows it."

"You can save yourself wind, Ralston. I'll get you up or I'll wait here till one of us is dead."

Ralston's chuckle came up again.

"I'll save myself wind. Didn't expect you'd do it, old scout, but I had to have some fun with you. You're easy, Roscoe."

Roscoe was silent.

"No need to wait till one of us kicks the bucket, Roscoe. I've got a knife. I've just a few words to say to you before I use it, Roscoe. You wouldn't look on me as exactly the kind of egg to have a conscience, would you? Well, in a way I have. I was sorry for that poor fish Rogers I shot. As I tried to tell you, it was a private quarrel between us.

"I'm sorry for that kid girl, too. I hardly remember her, but it is tough luck for her, coming out to meet her idolized brother and finding him ready to dangle at the end of a noose. Roscoe, when I'm gone, why shouldn't you be Tom Ralston?

"You've no connections, I understand. You've got the letters, and they'll tell you everything you need to know. Of course," the sardonic chuckle again, "you can't marry her, Roscoe. But maybe the time will come when you'll be able to let her know the facts. How about it, Roscoe?"

"You devil!" gritted Roscoe through his teeth. "Ralston, I'll see you hanged for that if I lie here till all eternity."

"Oh, no, you won't, Roscoe, because I'm going to cut this rope in a few moments. Just got to have a little fun with you first. Roscoe, you poor egg, all you've got to do is to go down to headquarters with the report of my death, take your discharge, and then go back to where little sister is waiting for you. You can be Tom Ralston for the rest of your days, and with your own savings and little sister's, your future's made. She's the sort of trusting, innocent little thing that will never ask inconvenient questions. How about it, Roscoe?" the insinuating voice went on. "Think it over, Roscoe, because it's damn cold lying here and I'm due for a warmer place in about ten seconds."

And Roscoe, leaning over the edge of the cliff, saw Roscoe draw a knife from his boot. It was only a little pocket-knife, but still Roscoe could not understand how he had managed to secrete it after the thorough searching he had given him.

"Ralston! Don't be a fool!" Roscoe shouted, as the man on the ledge began to hack at the rope.

But he knew in his heart that Ralston was no fool. He was only doing what he himself would have done in his place.

"Ralston!" he shouted again, as he saw a strand of the rope, at which Ralston was hacking, fly back.

Ralston stopped in his operations to look up at the man above him.

"Think it over, Roscoe, that's my last word to you," he chuckled. "You and little sister, in love with each other, and the dear child wondering why you don't say the fatal words that will make you man and wife. Roscoe, ex-corporal, torn between the promptings of love and his notorious sense of duty as a former member of the

Force. And the alternative of telling little sister that she isn't really little sister, and that her brother dropped over a ledge to avoid stretching hemp. Oh, it's a great situation, Roscoe. If there's anything to this spirit-return business, I shall be watching you and chuckling over it. The good man struggling against adversity, you know. Here goes, old scout."

Roscoe saw Ralston's hand hacking vigorously at the remaining strands of the rope. Again he shouted, conscious of the futility of it. And then, with a sudden jerk, the rope parted. The severed end flew violently back. Ralston's body disappeared abruptly down the precipitous slide below the ledge, the echoes of his last mocking words ringing in Roscoe's ears.

Roscoe crawled to the extreme limit of the precipice edge and tried to peer over the shelf below. He could see nothing. Then, managing to gain his feet, he toiled painfully back until he struck the trail leading through Little Wolf pass.

Until he was on the other side of the Desolations he hardly realized that the pack was still strapped to his back. He warmed himself at a fire, and crouched over it till morning. Then he atempted to work his way over the snows to the foot of the precipice over which Ralston had fallen.

He found the ledge, but it was impossible to reach the gorge beneath it, into which the body had descended. It was plain enough, however, that Ralston's death had been instantaneous. Buried beneath the tons of snow that filled the depths of the gorge, and crushed by the terrific fall almost beyond human semblance, it seemed clear that what remained of Ralston would lie there until the crumbling bones had dissolved under the scorching suns and bitter frosts of ages.

V

A WEEK later, by dint of forced marches Corporal Roscoe reached Fort Wilson on the Athabasca. He found a number of policemen posted there in preparation for a proposed extension of police jurisdiction northward in the spring. Inspector McCoy, who was in charge of the district, had also arrived there a few days before.

Stables had been constructed and the whole fort enlarged with the purpose of turning it into a divisional post. But the most grisly evidence that Roscoe's arrival with his prisoner had been expected consisted in an enclosure that had been constructed in the prison yard.

Inside this was a gallows and trap, with a two-hundred pound bag of meal suspended from the new hempen rope.

Jim found not a single man at the post with whom he was acquainted. During his three years in the Arctic the entire personnel of the Force had changed or had been redistributed throughout the length and breadth of the Dominion. Roscoe was known only as a name, listed as on patrol in search of Ralston.

Inspector McCoy, also a new figure in the Force since Roscoe's time, was on a journey to a nearby mission and was not expected back until after sundown. Roscoe, even after he had shaved and drawn new clothing from the store, felt strangely embarrassed in the company of his fellows after nearly three years of almost unbroken silence. Speech had become difficult for him, and he found himself groping for familiar words to express his thoughts.

Sergeant Timmins, the chief non-commissioned officer in charge, a lank, sandy-haired Irishman, to whom Jim reported, was inclined to be bitter, and did not conceal the fact when he learned that Roscoe had made his capture and that the captive had been lost in the avalanche.

"Some people have all the luck and don't know how to use it," he growled. "If 'twas me had taken that murderin' hound, and won the promotion that's past due coming to me, you can bet your boots, Roscoe, that Ralston wudn't have got away from me."

Roscoe received the slur indifferently. All his mind was preoccupied with Ellen Ralston. How was he to make known the truth to her? Or should he ever make it known? During that week's lonely journey southward, Ralston's insinuating proposition had been working like a slow ferment in his mind.

After all, why could he not adopt the personality of Ralston, for Ellen's benefit? Once he had taken his discharge, and the matter was officially disposed of, there would be none to question him about his name, and he was not likely to meet anyone who knew him.

Why should he not go back to the mission, keeping up the fiction that he was Tom Ralston, and take the girl wherever she decided to go? She need never know the truth. And she was nothing to him. He emphasized that in his mind. He would just take her somewhere and never see her again.

Inspector McCoy, a tall, monocled officer of the conservative type, received Roscoe's report better than Sergeant Timmins had done.

"Well, I'm sorry you lost your man, Corporal," he said, "but you were not responsible for that. You've done good work, and it will be reported at Ottawa. Of course you're in line for promotion, and there's a sergeantcy vacant. You'll be thinking of rejoining?"

"No, sir, I'm going to hand in my papers," Roscoe said.

The Inspector's eyes narrowed.

"Had enough of the service, Corporal?" he asked. "I guess those three years in the Arctic must have been pretty bad, but you'll have your pick of a soft snap after what you've been through."

"It's not that, sir. I've decided to take up a ranch," said Roscoe.

"Very well," answered the Inspector stiffly. To his mind, any man who left the Force was a fool. Roscoe would be back to re-enlist later, with his chance of a sergeantcy throw away, he was certain. "Make yourself at home around here until your discharge comes through from Ottawa," he said.

"That will be a matter of weeks, sir."

"No pressing engagements, have you, Roscoe?" drawled the Inspector ironically.

"Nothing very particular, sir, but I'd like leave of absence to go up to the Moravian Mission. Father Holtz and I are old friends."

"Ah, well, then I've bad news for you, Roscoe," said the Inspector. "Father Holtz died two days ago of malignant smallpox."

Roscoe was stunned by the news. With the passing of the old priest there was not a man anywhere in the divisional district who knew him.

"Oh, by the bye," McCoy continued, "you didn't happen to meet little Ellen Ralston when you passed through the mission?"

"Yes, sir, she—she didn't get stricken?" Roscoe almost gasped his deep concern.

"No, I guess not. You didn't let her know, of course, that the man you were bringing in happened to be her brother, did you, Roscoe? Everybody here has been particularly careful."

"No, sir."

"Well, when he discovered that he was suffering from the disease, before it reached the contagious stage, Father Holtz sent Miss Ralston down to Fort Wilson in the Mission motor-boat, in charge of a young German assistant of his, a fellow named Green. He arranged with one of the natives, who stayed by him, to signal on the telegraph key in a certain way, in case he died, and that happened. There's a clear channel down the Athabasca, so Green and Ellen Ralston ought to be here any time now. I'm glad you kept the news from her. We'll hide the facts somehow. Now about that leave of yours—"

"I won't apply at present, sir," said Roscoe.

He was thinking that he could best protect Ellen from the knowledge of her brother's past by being on the spot when she arrived. It was not likely the girl would stay longer than the night at the fort, and he could accompany her down-country. Of course he would have to explain the deception to the Inspector.

He must get Ellen Ralston out of the district as quickly as possible, or, sooner or later, someone would blurt out the truth to her.

With the sudden cessation of his months of patrol and the advent of the spring, an immense lethargy had come to him. He slept the greater part of two days and nights. Thus it happened he was lying on his cot in the barracks on the second day when an orderly came in, shouting his name.

"You're wanted in the office, Corporal," he said. "Father Green and Miss Ralston have just come in."

Jim leaped to his feet, adjusted his uniform, and hurried across the barracks square, past that grisly enclosure, above which the top of the gallows, with the cross-piece could be seen, and to the Inspector's office. Ellen and Father Green were standing, facing McCoy, who was looking at them with a puzzled air. Near the door Sergeant Timmins was standing.

As Roscoe entered, Ellen turned and ran to him with a little cry of gladness. She flung her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you've arrived here safe," she cried. "I was so afraid for you, taking that horrible man with you as a prisoner. I feared he might get the upper hand of you on the way, and do you some harm, perhaps kill you while you were asleep."

Father Green advanced and shook Roscoe warmly by the hand.

"Goot to see you, Mr. Ralston, goot," exclaimed the stupid young priest.

Over his shoulder Roscoe saw that Sergeant Timmins was staring at him in an extraordinary manner. And the same expression was on the face of Inspector McCoy. Instantly he understood what that expression meant. They supposed him to be Ralston! A stupid mix-up, but readily explained. Only—how could Jim explain it in the presence of the girl?

Sergeant Timmins moved quietly a pace or two toward the door. McCoy had moved back to his desk, and stood there, one hand closing about a partly opened drawer. Beneath the fingers Roscoe could see the outlines of an army pistol.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation. He heard McCoy speaking:

"Miss Ralston, you identify this man as your brother, Thomas Ralston?"

"Why—why, of course!" The girl was staring in bewilderment at the Inspector. "Of course I do. We met up at the Mission."

"You didn't remember his face?"

"No, but I'd have known him in a moment from an old photograph. Why? Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter, Miss Ralston, but—"

He pressed his bell, and instantly an acting-corporal appeared at the door from the orderly-room.

"Corporal Jones, please escort Miss Ralston to my quarters. I shall see you a little later, Miss Ralston."

The girl went out in bewilderment, partly reassured by Roscoe's nod. The moment the door had closed behind them McCoy turned to Roscoe again.

"Well—er—Corporal, have you any statement to make upon this subject?" he inquired.

Roscoe found it difficult to keep his face straight.

"Why, sir, I see what you mean," he answered. "The fact is, when we found Miss Ralston at the Mission, Ralston and I agreed to exchange identities for her benefit, so that she should not know the truth. I meant to explain that, sir."

"You mean you pretended to be Ralston for her benefit, and he pretended to be yourself?"

"Exactly, sir. I told her I was bringing him in for a breach of the liquor regulations."

"You can substantiate this, Father Green?" asked the Inspector.

Father Green was beaming.

"Ja, ja, dot iss Mr. Ralston," he insisted. "Father Holtz, he say Mr. Ralston, he know him und—"

"Wait!" thundered McCoy. "Did these two men exchange identities at the Mission?"

"Vhy, dot man, dot iss Mr. Ralston," persisted the blockhead. "De corporal wass bringing him in mit handcuffs on him."

Inspector McCoy's voice became as chill as steel.

"Ralston!" he thundered.

But it was not at Jim that he was looking. He was nodding at Sergeant Timmins, who had been reaching quietly up to a cupboard on the wall. Suddenly Roscoe felt his arms pinioned from behind. The bracelets snapped upon his wrists.

"Well, Ralston, we've got you at last," McCoy smiled softly.

VI

STILL stunned and dumbfounded by this development, Jim Roscoe paced the narrow confines of his cell. It was a single cubicle of stone, the only cell in the post, just large enough to contain the army cot placed there to accommodate some occasional offender against barracks regulations, yet strong enough to hold the most desperate criminal.

It faced a narrow passage with a door at the further end, where there was a small room for the guard. In the darkening twilight Roscoe could hear the shuffle of the guard's feet as he lounged against the wall, glancing over a newspaper. Occasionally the man, a young recruit, would march

along the length of the corridor, his rifle in his hand, and peer into Roscoe's cell with interest. To him, the capture of the badly wanted murderer, who had so long evaded justice, was the most thrilling event that had happened in the whole period of his military service.

Roscoe had not yet quite succeeded in piecing events together in his mind. It was only slowly that the damning nature of his situation came home to him. He had been identified as the fugitive murderer, Ralston, by the blockhead of a priest, Father Green, and, more damning feature still, by Ellen Ralston. His protests had been contemptuously dismissed. And what appeared to clinch the matter was the existence of Ralston's correspondence upon him.

From the beginning of the gruelling inquisition that had taken place in the office of Inspector McCoy it had been assumed that he was Ralston. McCoy had granted one concession. He had told Jim that he would wire to Ottawa immediately for instructions.

The click of the outer door, at the end of the passage, startled Jim from his reflections. There came the sound of voices. Through the grille in the cell door Roscoe saw Inspector McCoy and Sergeant Timmins appear in the corridor. Then the door of his cell was unlocked.

"'Shun!" shouted the sergeant, and Jim automatically obeyed the long unheard command.

McCoy held a paper in his hand.

"Ralston, I've just received a wire from Ottawa in answer to my communication about you this afternoon," the Inspector began.

"My name's not Ralston, sir."

"Silence!" shouted Timmins.

The sergeant's vindictive feeling against Jim, whom he considered to have played a dirty trick upon himself personally by lying to him, had inflamed his feelings almost to the murder point.

"There exists no doubt whatever as to your identity, Ralston," McCoy continued. "Had you succeeded in your scheme, you would have been immune for the rest of your days. A clever trick and a daring one. However, that's neither here nor there. The Dominion authorities have ordered that the execution is to proceed as scheduled. You will be hanged at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. Father Green will be permitted to attend you tonight. And I'm damned sorry for you, Ralston. I shall now read you the warrant for your execution."

He read, but Jim heard not a word of the involved phraseology. His mind was casting over the situation feverishly and he could see no way out of it. Dominion justice does not favor stays of execution once sentence has been passed. And the sentence of death had been passed on Ralston nearly three years before.

If Jim's enlistment papers, hidden away somewhere in the pigeon-holes of the much confused headquarters of the Police at Ottawa, could be unearthed there might be a chance of clearing up the situation. But Roscoe quickly realized the futility of this hope. No fingerprints of recruits were taken. The descriptions were perfunctory. Roscoe and Ralston were about the same height; each of them had brown eyes, was of medium coloring, and possessed no distinguishing marks. There was in either case an immaterial past history that would certainly never be verified pending a stay of execution. No, the trap was proof.

McCoy had gone and Jim was pacing his cell again. Later the guard brought him his supper. He could not eat. For himself, he could face the death that was inevitable sooner or later. But a hideous death upon the gallows. . . . And then Ellen. What would become of her? What would she believe? Had she turned from him in loathing? He hoped so. She must know the truth. They could not have managed to conceal the sordid business from her.

Again the cell door clicked. This time Jim heard Ellen's voice. And he shrank back into his cell instinctively. He had hoped to be spared that. But again the door was opened. Sergeant Timmins stood there, with the girl beside him.

"You can have ten minutes with the prisoner," Timmins announced gruffly, "but you must keep six feet away from him."

Jim was amazed at the girl's appearance. She had seemed such a little, helpless thing, but now her eyes were bright and tearless and defiant.

"Tom, I know all now," she said, "and

I want you to understand that you mean just the same to me as ever. I know you couldn't be guilty of the horrible crime that they say you have committed, and I never will believe you did it. I love you, Tom, dear, and always shall."

Should he tell her the truth? Would she believe him? Jim decided that this was no time for explanations.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know, Tom. There's hope," she whispered feverishly as Timmins glanced aside at the guard for an instant. "Don't give up hope."

It was her lips rather than her voice that said it. Next moment Timmins had turned toward them again, and the girl was speaking about persons known only to Jim through the letters.

He never remembered afterward just what they talked about during the remainder of that interview. All the while he had the sense that Ellen was bidding him hope, though he could not imagine how it was possible to hope, or from what source aid could come. Then the sergeant intimated that the time was up. She flung her arms about his neck with a wild cry. And in his ear was that whisper of hope again.

Then Sergeant Timmins had intervened and Ellen was going down the corridor.

Much later, when it was already the day of his execution, Jim was informed by Timmins that Father Green was ready to see him.

"I'm ready for him," said Jim. "And Sergeant, I want to make a will and have you two witness it."

"I'll witness it for you," replied Timmins sardonically. "That's just about the best thing you can do, Ralston."

Even under those circumstances Sergeant Timmins's malice was suppressed with difficulty. He would not let Jim have paper and pencil, but wrote down from his dictation:

"I leave everything to Ellen Ralston."

"You want to say, 'My sister Ellen Ralston.' That will be clearer," observed Timmins, pausing, with his pencil in the air.

"Just write down what I've said."

"Still keeping up the game that you're Roscoe, are you? Well, that game won't help you, Ralston," sneered the other.

He wrote as ordered and Father Green was summoned. It was with some difficulty that he was made to understand what was required of him. In the end, the will was signed and witnessed, though the sergeant balked at first at witnessing the signature, "James Roscoe." Jim gave the will to Green.

"I guess that'll be all," he said. But Father Green had already preceded him into the cell. He stood there, looking at Jim with an expression of extraordinary concern upon his face.

Jim was about to decline his ministrations. Then that expression of the young German's checked him. He went into the cell. Sergeant Timmins withdrew, leaving the guard in the corridor outside the unlocked door.

The priest began a prayer. The guard walked slowly up and down the corridor. He passed the cell, repassed, while the German continued chanting.

But was this a German prayer? Between the words of it queer English words seemed to be forming. Then Roscoe realized that Father Green was delivering a message to him:

"We save you. . . . We made our plans. . . . I must say here und nod know noddings, because of my flock. . . . We save you, ja. . . ."

As Roscoe listened, stupefied, and hardly able to believe his ears as he looked into Father Green's stupid, vacuous face, the sentry passed again. He grounded his rifle, and leaned back against the wall. From the clock in the office sounded the hour of three, clear, melodious, bell-like tones that pierced through the silence.

To Jim's amazement, the priest's hand, which had gone under his loose cloak, came out, clutching something which he slipped into his own. It was a revolver. Mechanically Jim slipped it inside his tunic. The priest's chant still continued, but Father Green seemed to be listening for something.

It came, the clicking of the outer door. Ellen's voice sounded once more, and Jim, now keyed up to the highest pitch, felt himself trembling with anticipation. What was the girl doing there? But he was free. Whatever happened, he was free, while he was in possession of that weapon. If he

had to turn it upon himself, at least it would save him from death upon the gibbet.

Then the voice of Sergeant Timmins came to his ears:

"It's dead against orders, Miss Ralston, but I guess I can let you see your brother for just one minute to give him your last message. It must be one minute strictly, though."

"Only for one minute, Sergeant Timmins, and I'll be grateful to you all the rest of my life," Roscoe heard Ellen's clear voice in answer.

All the while Father Green had been chanting. Now he stopped, and as the footfalls sounded along the flags of the external corridor he glanced at Jim sharply. Jim understood that the moment for action had arrived. He drew the weapon the priest had given him from his tunic, gripped it with his fingers, and, spinning the cylinder, discovered that all the chambers were loaded.

Next moment Sergeant Timmins's key grated in the lock, and Father Green had resumed his chanting again. Then Timmins appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the full moon that hung over the barracks yard.

"Your sister's got something to say to you, Ralston," he announced harshly.

All that happened after that seemed to pass instantaneously. Behind the sergeant, Roscoe saw the girl standing in an attitude of tense expectancy, her face white, strained, ethereal in the moonlight. One moment Sergeant Timmins was addressing him. The next the girl had taken a single step between them, and had whipped a revolver from her dress and thrust it into the sergeant's face.

"Hands up!" her voice rang out, vibrant, shrill, and fearless.

VII

PARALYZED with amazement, Sergeant Timmins made no move of any kind. Jim saw that the hand that held the revolver was as steady as a rock.

"Please put your hands up," came the girl's restrained, quiet voice once more. "I shall not warn you again."

Her finger was perceptibly tightening upon the trigger. There was no mistaking Ellen's determination to shoot and on the instant. And slowly Sergeant Timmins's hands went up over his head.

There followed a moment or two of utter silence. Then the guard, who had been standing in the corridor outside the cell, with his rifle grounded, uttered a strangling sound and began to raise it. As he did so, Jim Roscoe recovered his self-possession. He took command of the situation. Before the rifle had come up to a horizontal position he had the constable covered with his revolver.

"Put 'em up!" he said quietly.

The constable obeyed, letting his rifle clatter to the stone flags of the corridor.

And again there followed a moment or two of silence. It was strange how deliberate the whole proceedings appeared to be. Father Green was still standing motionless in the shadows of the cell. Sergeant Timmins still remained with his hands above his head, Ellen's revolver thrust out toward his face. Jim caught the girl's eyes for an instant. The resolution, the fire in them astounded him. She seemed to be possessed of superhuman courage, for all her fragility and timid aspect.

"Not a sound or I shoot," said the girl very softly to the sergeant. "Get into that cell!"

In all his years of service Sergeant Timmins had never blanched in the face of an enemy. Now his expression was a picture. Perhaps it was sheer surprise rather than the fear of death that led him to obey. But mechanically at the girl's words he entered the cell that had housed Jim, in which the priest was still standing motionless.

"Now you!" Roscoe ordered the recruit.

The young constable, seeing that his superior officer had yielded to discretion, made no bones about following his example. He stepped into the cell. Jim hesitated just a moment, for Father Green made no movement to effect his escape. Then he remembered what the priest had said to him, and realized that he meant to appear to have been taken by surprise. He could not afford to outlaw himself, with his Indian charges at the mission. Jim glanced at Ellen, who made an almost imperceptible motion indicating assent, and clanged the door upon the three, shooting back the bolt outside.

"Now, quick!" whispered the girl, turning toward him.

Next instant the two were running through the outer doorway. Before they had emerged into the yard of the barracks they could hear their two captives shouting at the top of their voices. But the sounds were cut off abruptly as Jim closed the outer door behind him. Had the prisoners' shouts been heard by any of the detachment asleep in barracks? It seemed improbable, for the men's sleeping quarters were some little distance away, and there were two doors for the sounds to penetrate.

They did not stop to think but ran into the yard, which was flooded with moonlight.

"This way!" panted Jim.

He caught Ellen, who seemed confused as to her bearings, and drew her into the shadows cast by the barracks buildings.

They ran on. The post was built around a small quadrangle with the enclosure, over which protruded the top of the gibbet. Jim hoped that Ellen had not understood the meaning of that grisly thing, horrible in the moonlight. On their right lay the quarters of the Inspector and the office. On their left was the barracks structure. Ahead of them were the stables. They could hear the horses shuffling in their stalls. But they were useless, either for flight or for pursuit, owing to the snow, which still lay deep upon the ground, covered with a frozen crust that made it impassable for horses. Between the stables and the barracks ran the road toward the river.

They were nearing the further end of the quadrangle when suddenly a constable on sentry duty appeared around the angle of the barracks building. He was moving stiffly, carrying his rifle at trail, muffled to the ears against the cold. At the sight of the two he stopped. He stared at them and directly blocked their way. In an instant, he appeared to take in the situation. He shouted in warning and raised his rifle.

Before he had time to aim or fire, Roscoe had hurled himself upon him. They grappled. The sentry was a little Welshman, built like a barrel. The two men fell writhing into the snow. The sentry could not use his gun, which Roscoe held fast with one hand. But he clutched the corporal in a grip like a vise, from which it was impossible for Roscoe to detach himself. And all the while he never ceased to yell.

Even when Ellen, running up, thrust her revolver into his face, he refused to relax his grip and only yelled the louder. Jim knew that the girl would never fire. Everything seemed lost. He did not know whether he would have shot the sentry, but he could not get his hand to the revolver, his wrist being caught tight in one of the Welshman's sinewy hands. But as the other shifted his grasp for an instant in order to seize him more securely, Jim, with a violent effort, succeeded in wrenching back his right arm. He delivered a terrific short-arm jolt to the point of the jaw.

The constable's head sagged backward. His grasp relaxed. His body grew limp. It was only for an instant. But in that instant Roscoe succeeded in detaching himself from the other man's grip. He struggled to his feet. But now a new antagonist was upon the scene. Inspector McCoy, aroused by the sentry's shouts, was standing in the doorway of his quarters, a revolver in his hand. With a cry, he aimed and discharged it.

Jim felt the whip of one bullet as it grazed his cheek. He flung himself at McCoy. By a miracle he escaped injury as the remaining bullets hissed through the air. He bore the inspector heavily to the ground, tore the revolver from his hand, and sent it hurtling across the barracks yard into the snow. McCoy lay still. Falling, his head had come in contact with the base of an iron hitching-post in front of his quarters, a relic of the early trading days. He was momentarily stunned. Without more than a glance at his face, Roscoe caught Ellen by the arm and the two resumed their flight.

They were only just in time, for already the half-a-dozen men who comprised the detachment were appearing at the door of the barracks in various stages of undress. From the cell came faintly the sound of the voices of the two prisoners who were continuing to shout at the top of their lungs. The Welsh sentry was already sitting up, and trying to take in the situation. But the whole picture was a mere momentary blur on Jim's mind, for now he and Ellen were clear of the yard, and racing

down the single street of the little settlement in the direction of the Athabasca.

Jim followed the girl's lead blindly without inquiring what her plans were. It was evident from the certainty of her movements, that she had made them. They raced on, hearing the shouts burst out behind them. The men would have to stop to fasten their shoes. That gave the fugitives perhaps a half-minute of leeway, Jim calculated, as he ran on beside Ellen.

Here and there the snow-bound shacks of the little settlement loomed up on either side of them. Dogs barked. They struggled on. Then the river came into sight, the lordly Athabasca, glutted with great floes that sailed majestically down on its slow current. And in the middle was a broad band of black water.

They ran on, the breath hissing through their parted lips, until they were among the brush that fringed the river. A little distance from the settlement the forests began. Sheltered by the shelving bank, Ellen began to run at the water's edge toward the scatering outposts of trees. Once within their shelter she stopped.

"We came down in the Mission motor-boat," she panted. "Father Green tied it somewhere along here. I—I'm trying to remember. If it's gone—"

Behind them they heard their pursuers in full chase. The police were beating to and fro, temporarily thrown off the scent. In the deep shadows of the trees the trail of the fugitives was not immediately visible.

"It's this way, I'm sure," gasped the girl, starting off again.

They followed a tiny trail among the trees. At every opening leading down toward the water Ellen stopped to scan the locality. They heard the shouts of their pursuers taking up the chase again. Their footprints had been discovered.

But of a sudden Ellen uttered a little cry, and pointed through the trees. There at the edge of the water Roscoe could see the motor-boat, a small craft with a tiny roofed cabin.

In another moment the two were at the water's edge. The little craft was high and dry above the waves. A frost, succeeding the thaws of early spring, had lowered the level of the flood water.

Jim struggled desperately to untie the rope that fastened the motor-boat to a tree, while the shouts of their pursuers behind them grew ever clearer. He had no knife and there was no time to search the boat for one. At last he managed to get the rope free of the tree. He flung it inside, and began desperately trying to get the craft afloat. A root was in the way. Along the trail the foremost of their pursuers was appearing.

With a mighty heave he overcame the obstacle and sent the boat splashing into the water.

"Jump in!" he pleaded.

Ellen obeyed, crouching in the thwarts. As Jim put one foot over the edge the Welsh sentry, with a yell of triumph, dashed down the trail toward him.

It was the projecting root of the tree that saved his life. As he fell sprawling, Jim's bullet flew over his head and thudded into the trunk. Simultaneously a cloud passed over the moon. The light faded.

Jim stepped into the boat, kicking it into the ice that fringed the shore. The floes parted, the current seized it. He bent over the engine, attempting to start it.

"There's plenty of gas," whispered Ellen. "We filled the tank when—we knew this was the only chance for you."

The boat was drifting into midstream. But now their pursuers were gathered upon the bank. Jim heard their shouts to surrender. There followed a fusillade. For the most part the bullets passed overhead, but one buried itself in the thwart at Jim's side as he bent over the engine.

Suddenly, with a cough and a splutter, the chilled engine started. Another moment and the current had carried them behind the shelter of a tangle of willow at the water's edge. Another volley followed, but the shooting was wild, the fugitives all but invisible. The engine was running smoothly, and the little boat forged her way into midstream.

Straggling, irregular firing followed. As the craft gained momentum the police, scattering through the trees, kept up irregular volleying. But the dark held. With a final spluttering chug, preparatory to settling down to her regular speed, the engine drove the little boat around the curve of the shore. Hoarse shouts of anger greeted her disappearance. Then nothing was audible but the sounds of the night, nothing

visible but the dark forests beside the stream.

Ellen leaned over Jim.

"We've beaten them, Tom," she whispered exultantly.

"I guess so," Jim acquiesced.

The girl put her hand on his shoulder and withdrew it wet. A cry of terror broke from her lips. Jim's shirt was soaked with blood, running from the wound in his neck made by one of the random bullets of the last fusillade.

VIII

"THAT'S nothing, Ellen. Just nipped me, I reckon."

Jim crouched over the wheel, while the girl began unfastening Jim's shirt at the throat and trying as best she could to sponge away the blood. The wound was a slight one through the fleshy part of the neck above the collar-bone, but a small artery had been severed and it was bleeding profusely. At last Ellen succeeded in making a compress and placing it over the site of the injury and bandaged it. All the while Jim steered the boat down the Athabasca.

"Tom, let me take the wheel. Father Green showed me how to run her."

"I'll steer her, Ellen. I'm feeling fine."

Ellen peered anxiously into his face, but she could not see how blanched it was. She yielded to Jim's insistence reluctantly.

And the hours began to slip away. Jim drove the little boat at her full speed, sometimes miraculously escaping the great floes that choked the river, but ever on and on under the towering pines and spruce. All the while Jim was subconsciously listening for sounds of pursuit.

It was certain that there was a police motor-boat, but there was the chance that she required calking, the chance that the spring gasoline supply had not arrived—a score of chances on which their lives depended. All the while, too, he was turning over in his mind the possibilities of escape. It was a novel position for him, the grim tracker of men, to find himself an outlaw.

"Tom, where are we going? To the Mission?"

"I guess I'll take you there, Ellen, if we can make it. You'll be safe there. I guess it's the only chance. I don't think you'll be prosecuted for what you did. The police will want to keep that part of the business dark. They'd be a laughing-stock throughout the country. Held up by a girl! I'll take you there and then I'll go—"

"Tom, I'm going where you go!"

A thrill of joy ran through him.

"You mean—?"

"Did you think I was going to leave you, Tom? I'll share whatever dangers you must face. Did you think I'd leave you, even if you were not wounded? Never say that to me again. We'll face everything together."

"Will you share the life of a hunted man, one of those men whom the police always get in the end? That's their boast. They always get their man, however long—"

"We'll share the same life, Tom. We'll fight together. And we'll win!"

Her voice rang out clear and vibrant, and Jim Roscoe was silent in sheer astonishment.

"Then, Ellen, I tell you what we'll do. As like as not they're on our trail in another boat already. I've got a little valley about a hundred miles away from the river. They'll never think of looking for me there. And I've built a shack and got some supplies in it. We'll make for it, hide there and plan our next move when we're there."

"Very well, Tom," answered Ellen.

He let her take the wheel for a while, and rummaged through the boat. It was stocked with a week's food, a supply ample to enable them to reach the valley. There were snowshoes and a small supply of ammunition, which fitted Jim's revolver, as well as an old Army carbine. But the latter was useless, since there were no shells for it, at least Jim could find none. He was satisfied that they could make the valley. Weak though he was, his wound had ceased to bleed. He must make it. And then . . .

Well, he would not speculate on that. Reassuring Ellen as to his condition, he took the wheel again. They drove on through the bitter cold of the night. Fortunately there were blankets in the boat. Crouching over the wheel, wrapped in these, Jim tried to figure out his future

relationship to Ellen. If ever he had planned to tell her the truth, the night's events had made it impossible.

It was not far from dawn when the faintest throbbing murmur came out of the distance. At first Jim was not sure. Ellen leaned forward.

"Tom, did you hear that sound behind us? What is it? It sounds like—another boat."

There was no need to answer her. Ellen understood. She shuddered and crouched down beside him, her cheek against his.

"It's five or six miles away," said Jim. "Sounds travel very far along the water. And five miles from here there's a creek runs into the Athabasca. We can make it. We'll run the boat ashore and strike along the bank toward my valley. Get the things together into a pack. Food, snowshoes, everything we'll need."

He drove the boat on around the bend of the river. The sounds of pursuit died away. But soon that throbbing began again, louder, more insistent, then terribly loud. Once they were sighted there would be no chance of escape for them. The last mile was a torture, with the rhythmic chugging of the boat behind them. Jim scanned each inch of the shore for his goal.

At last he found it. A little creek, almost indistinguishable, even in the dull gray of dawn that was beginning to spread across the water. He whispered encouragement to Ellen. It was almost a certainty that their motor had been heard, but he estimated they would have an hour or two of leeway. Their route could not be discovered till it had grown light, and the police boat would overshoot its mark by at least two miles. None of these new men was likely to know of the creek and every square mile of the surrounding territory was mapped out in Jim's mind.

He drove toward the entrance. The boat pushed through the overhanging branches, her motive power shut off. Taking a paddle, Jim began to push up the little stream. After a while he halted. The police boat was almost opposite them, to judge from the sounds she made. They waited, and heard the chugging grow fainter.

Ellen understood. With a glad little cry she flung her arms around Jim's neck.

"We're safe," she whispered happily.

Jim said nothing. He paddled furiously, reckless of the danger from his wound. Four or five miles he covered, till the creek widened into a small lake. He drove the boat ashore into a tangle of undergrowth. He took the pack that Ellen had made up, and helped the girl ashore. They sat down and put on their snowshoes. It was light now, and through the trees appeared the red rim of the risen sun.

Ellen ran to Jim and kissed him.

"Are we safe?" she asked.

"I guess they'll never find the place where we stepped off. Yes, we're safe—for the time."

No need to tell her that the police never let up till they have got their man.

They started along the trail. The snow still lay thick in the forest and progress was difficult. Encumbered with his pack, weak from loss of blood, Jim found it needed all his will-power to keep up the march. The first few miles he managed to conceal his plight from Ellen, though the girl's anxiety for him betrayed itself in her frequent uneasy glances. She begged him to let her carry the pack, but Jim insisted that it was no burden.

After the first halt, however, Jim knew that it was touch and go whether he ever reached the valley. And there was no possibility of concealing his weakness any longer.

"We must get on," he kept repeating.

But he no longer resisted when Ellen took the pack from him.

The country grew more open. They struggled on through the afternoon. Jim's wound was growing painful, and throbbing badly, but he forced himself to keep the pace he had set. When they camped that night he dropped exhausted. It was Ellen who built the fire and cooked the meal of coffee, bacon and cakes baked in the ashes. And Jim could swallow only a few gulps of coffee.

"We must get on," was all that he could say.

He let her dress his wound, noting the look of fear in her eyes as she inspected it. All through the night he tossed uneasily beside the fire. All the past was growing vague, jumbled. Sometimes he was hardly conscious of his identity. And everything was submerged in that throb-

bing pain that seemed to engulf one side and arm in liquid fire.

The tarrying dawn brought back full consciousness. His arm was badly swollen, and Ellen was in despair.

"Tom, we must camp here till you are better," the girl insisted. "We can't go on."

"We must go on," he answered, and doggedly took up the trail again, the new trail that they were making through virgin land, over rock and marsh, straight toward the well-known landmark of low hills upon the horizon.

By noon he was half-delirious again. By middle afternoon he was leaning on Ellen's arm. But still he kept the pace that he had set.

That night he babbled ceaselessly, yet, even in his delirium, he kept a guard upon his tongue. Ellen must never know the truth. Let death seal his lips if need be; she should never learn from him.

At dawn he struggled out of a gulf of chaos. He was only faintly aware how Ellen clung to him and tried to dissuade him, and how he pointed toward the nearing hills. And all that day only a flicker of consciousness supported the mere mechanical motions of his limbs.

Ellen seemed to realize that their only hope lay in pressing on, for she no longer attempted to dissuade him. Sometimes when consciousness flickered back, Jim would press her hand and smile, or stammer words of gratitude, and feel her arm about him.

At evening they were entering the pass that ran into the valley. And there, beside the little ice-bound stream, was the shack that he had built before and the cache where he had stored his little stock of supplies, untouched.

That was the last Jim knew. He came back to consciousness days later, after an interminable period of almost unendurable pain, to find Ellen at his side.

"Oh, Tom!"

Tears of happiness gushed from the girl's eyes as she bent over and kissed him.

Only her ceaseless attention had pulled him through the attack of violent fever. Now the crisis was past, the wound had begun to heal; the swollen arm was returning to the normal.

There followed days of convalescence while the winter relaxed its clutch upon the land, the ice left the stream and grass appeared. They were safe from pursuit. But how long? Sooner or later the police would follow on their trail, would find the valley. Well, he must get strong before he made his plans. And now he found a new zest in life, with Ellen always at his side.

Would the day ever come when he could tell her? Perhaps, he thought, if ever they got free. For the present he was content to feel the strength returning to his limbs with the advent of the spring.

They had food enough to last well into the summer. And before winter they would have disposed of their problem one way or another.

They explored the valley where Jim had planned to raise his herd of cattle. The only thing that troubled Jim was the fact that the recluse whom Ralston had murdered had occupied the shack just beyond the range of hills. Still, the fact that the adjoining valley had once been occupied, and that Ralston had visited it, did not argue that any other intruders were likely to enter it.

They had been exploring the edge of the valley where it began to ascend toward the pass which ran through the hills one afternoon. Ellen was a little distance ahead of Jim, gathering some of the wild anemones that had begun to dot the slopes. Suddenly Jim heard her call:

"Tom, come here! What's this tunnel place? It looks as if someone had been here before."

Jim hurried up. In the side of the hill, almost hidden by a tangle of budding undergrowth, was a low tunnel, quite clearly made by human hands.

Jim stooped and entered it, followed by Ellen. It narrowed, then widened. The roof fell back. They found themselves in a little glade whose presence would never have been suspected from the outside. A stream ran through it and on the sandy bank was an old, rusty pick. Here was a washing cradle, half-rotted away. Here, under an overhanging ledge, were footprints. Roscoe felt his heart leap with dread as he followed them to their source in a small cave under the hillside.

Upon the limestone floor were several large bags of strong burlap, still in good

preservation. One of them gaped; a stream of fine yellow particles had issued out upon the cave's floor.

And suddenly Jim understood.

"Ralston's gold!" he shouted.

He started and laid his hand to his belt as footsteps sounded on the limestone interior if the cave. *A figure was emerging from the darkness. Ralston!*

IX

THE sight of this man, whom he had imagined buried beneath hundreds of tons of snow at the foot of the precipice, struck Roscoe dumb, so that he could only stand staring at him. Ralston advanced, a sneering smile upon his lips. Ellen clung to Jim in terror at this apparition. All the wile Ralston was walking easily toward them.

"Well, Roscoe?"

Jim remained silent. Was he a policeman still, and was it his duty to arrest Ralston and take him back a second time, himself to face the gallows in consequence? He was trying to collect his wits. Ralston halted two paces from him, an amused, sneering smile still flickering about his mouth.

"For a member of the force, Roscoe, I cannot compliment you on the possession of more than the gray matter of a moron," he said. "Let me clear up that perplexity in your mind which, I see, is troubling you.

"While I was lying on that ledge at the end of the rope, I saw that it formed the mouth of a small cave extending under the overhanging rocks. It was the simplest matter in the world to hold on to the edge of the rocks with my left hand while I cut the rope with my right. You thought I had fallen to the bottom of the precipice, Roscoe. In fact, your mind reacted in precisely the way that I intended it to."

"What does he mean by calling you Roscoe?" whispered Ellen. "Why did you say 'Ralston's gold'? Who—who is he? And who are you?"

The girl was trembling violently. Ralston had overheard her whisper to Roscoe. He grinned again.

"Explanations seem to be in order," he said. "I know all about that little mix-up you got into at the Fort, Roscoe, and I guess you don't propose to try to bring me in again. Even if you did, they'd be likely to hang you first for that murder and to inquire into my status afterward, you know. So I guess we stand here on an equal footing.

"You fool, Roscoe, there was no need for you to go back to the Fort at all. You had little sister here, and you could have gone back to her. Well, I learned what was happening, and how she held up the police and rescued you, which, of course, has very much enhanced the opinion I had of her. And I've been on the job here for quite some time, getting my gold together. I'm going to take Ellen away with me. I've got our line of flight pretty well doped out. The question is, what are you going to do, Roscoe?"

"Who is he? Who is he?" whispered Ellen in agitation.

"Why, I'm your brother, my dear Ellen," answered Ralston easily. "You see, when you came into this country looking for a man who was sentenced to be hanged, there was a chivalrous conspiracy on the part of everybody to keep you in the dark.

"This dull-witted policeman and I agreed to change identities for your benefit. If I had died under the avalanche, or swung at the rope's end, he was to have taken you away in the guise of your brother, and you would never have known. But fate ordered things differently, and I take it you will now transfer that remarkable loyalty of yours to me, instead of to this policeman who has really no claims upon you."

She understood in spite of his sneering, casual manner, and the look of anguish in her eyes as she turned them from one man to the other made Roscoe wince with pain.

"Is that true?" she whispered hoarsely. "Did you—did you deceive me?"

And Roscoe bowed his head.

"I—I must think," said Ellen, turning and moving out into the sunlight.

She spun about.

"Promise me you—you won't fight or hurt each other till it's all settled," she pleaded. "A truce till we know where we stand. Is that agreed?"

Roscoe nodded assent. Ralston indicated his agreement with a slight inclination of his head. The two men followed

Ellen out of the cave and back toward the shack.

Once she turned.

"We must find a way out," she said in a quiet voice.

But her head was bowed as she walked. Roscoe knew that the hurt was like to be a mortal one. Her faith in him, that faith that had been so complete, was broken.

Outside the shack she turned and faced them.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered. "Are you really my brother, Tom?" she asked Ralston. "Then—you did kill that man, that man who lived here, to get his gold?"

"I killed him in self-defense. The old man had sheltered me. I worked for him. I happened upon his mine by accident. He had tried to keep the knowledge of it from me. He drew his gun to shoot me and I fired in self-defense. That's the truth, Ellen."

Again that doubtful look from the one man to the other. Ralston went on.

"Your discovery of me this afternoon has only precipitated the inevitable. Roscoe, you and I have fought a long-drawn-out battle for three years, man against man, wits against wits. Well, I've won. But you can congratulate yourself that it was fate, not skill, that gave me the victory."

For the first time he seemed to throw off his mocking manner.

"Roscoe, it is for the winner to dictate the terms, and here are mine:

"I shall take my sister away with me, and of course the gold. Maybe I'll leave you a few nuggets, enough to pay your way to wherever you are minded to strike for. If you refuse—well, I'll put the police on your trail."

"A risky business, Ralston," answered Jim. "I don't think the situation is as clear as you think it is."

A mocking laugh burst from Ralston's lips.

"My dear Corporal, do you suppose I haven't made my plans for all contingencies?" he asked. "Good night, Roscoe. Good night, little sister. I shall call for my answer in the morning. If you have come to care for this dull-witted policeman—" he cast a shrewd glance at the girl. "I guess I can foretell what your decision is going to be." He laughed nastily.

He strode from the shack in his airy way, leaving Jim and Ellen sitting in the ruins of their hopes. For a long time neither spoke. Then Ellen said:

"He's my brother, the brother I came so far to find. Mr. Roscoe, I—I have felt that you were like a brother to me. I don't know how I can change feeling that way, or if I shall ever change. I don't know what to do. You see, the memory of that brother of mine has been with me all these years."

"You must go with him if you feel that way," said Jim quietly.

"Oh, I don't know what to do!" cried the girl wildly. "I'll tell you in the morning."

"Try to sleep," answered Jim. "Whatever it is to be, I'm ready for it. But you must sleep."

"Yes, I'll try to sleep," she answered, and, turning, groped her way into the shack.

The sun was dipping into the west. Neither of them had thought of supper. Neither thought of it now. Jim went to the little shelter that he had constructed for himself a short distance from the shack, wrapped his blankets around him, and sat down, resting his head in his hands.

Better a thousand times the constant apprehension of arrest than this. He knew that he loved Ellen with all his heart. He would never cease to love her. He realized the fatal mistake that she would make if she went away with her brother. And yet he had no right to speak the word that might restrain her.

Well, he would know in the morning. And, as the dark descended, he rolled himself in his blanket and tried to sleep.

But for hours sleep would not come to him, and he lay there, hearing the night sounds about him. It was dark as pitch. The moon would not rise till midnight. And when at last its globe appeared, a ball of white fire in the east, Jim still lay sleepless.

But gradually his eyelids grew heavy. He was falling into a doze, a confused dream in which he, Ralston and Ellen were still threshing out the situation. Suddenly he was on his feet, even before he knew the thing that had awakened him.

Someone had screamed. The cry rang

out again, Ellen's cry, as if she was in mortal peril.

Jim grasped his revolver and ran full speed toward the shack. Again he heard the girl cry. He saw dark figures darting in and out of the structure. Two of them were bearing something, Ellen, in their arms.

Treachery on Ralston's part! He had decided to anticipate the girl's decision. Jim rushed forward, shouting. He emptied his revolver into the midst of the forms that came rushing out of the shack, broke through them, rushing on toward Ellen.

He had almost reached her when a stunning blow upon the head swung him around. He staggered, fell upon his knees. The world was going black about him. He tried to rise, to force his way to the girl again, but he was conscious only of the grinning faces of Joe Camp and Labrecque peering into his, and then everything went out in blackness.

X

JIM could not have been unconscious for more than a few minutes, for when he next opened his eyes he found himself in the shack, and outside the risen moon hardly illuminated the darkness.

He was lying on the cot bed. By the light of a single candle on the table he saw Joe Camp and Labrecque poring over some papers which they had taken from his pocket.

"Yeh, that's so," he heard Joe Camp saying. "The police took this feller Roscoe fer Ralston and he bruk away before they could hang him. Two queer birds this policeman and Ralston, but we got the one, and I guess the other ain't far away. We'll finish the pair of them and divide that gold, Labrecque. Jest you and me, you understand, and kiss the rest of the gang good-bye."

The half-breed's cracked laugh rang out. Dazed as he still was, Roscoe was able to realize the situation. He had supposed that Ralston had led the gang of hooch-runners into the valley for the purpose of dividing up the gold, but now he realized that they must have followed him there in order to discover where it was concealed.

As this thought flashed through his mind there came back the memory of Ellen. With a groan, he tried to sit up on the cot, only to discover that his wrists and ankles were securely fastened to it, while his body was furthermore bound to one of the main beams of the shack by a rope around him.

His movement arrested the two hooch-runners' attention. Joe Camp came grinning toward him.

"Well, we got you this time, Corporal," he chuckled. "I guess we returned you what we got from you and there's more coming to you. Kick him fer me, Labrecque. I'm too stout to reach him with my foot."

The half-breed, snarling, dealt Jim a succession of violent kicks as he lay bound and helpless. Jim saw that his wounded hand was still in a bandage.

"Guess you're wondering how we found this shebeen of yours, Corporal," grinned the fat outlaw. "Jest luck, that's all. We got on Mr. Ralston's trail after you took him away, and found he'd given you the slip. Trailed him here, that's all. He's hiding somewhere, but we got our fellers camped in the pass and there ain't no way fer him to get away.

"Then we found you and the girl. Wasn't looking for no women, but I ain't the feller to turn up my nose at a good thing when I see it. And I guess Joe Camp'll prove a winner with that gold, arter I've divided with you, Labrecque, I mean," he continued, giving his confederate an uneasy glance.

Jim strained madly at his bonds. He struggled till the ropes bit deep into his wrists, causing the blood to start, but he could not budge them. Joe Camp and Labrecque stood looking on, the fat hooch-runner convulsed with laughter, but the half-breed's face was twisted into a savage scowl.

"Say Labrecque, it's great to see a policeman getting his bit," grinned Joe. "But that ain't nothing to what's coming to you, Corporal. You might have guessed we ain't planning to let you get away. Ain't leaving no witnesses behind us. We got a long row to hoe, and we're cleaning up behind us. Guess it's time we was going, Labrecque. Want to kick that feller again first?"

Apparently the half-breed's hate was satisfied in this direction. Instead, he struck

Jim a succession of blows in the face with his clenched fist.

"Jest before we go, Corporal, I'll do a little more explaining," said Joe Camp. "This here business is going to be a fair and square clean-up, so fur as you're concerned. Ain't going to leave no policemen up here with bullet holes in what's left of them. But fire—that's different, now. Any feller might fall asleep and get burned up arter he'd been drinking. Fire's clean, Corporal, so that's the way you're going. Think of the girl, Corporal, while you're warming up this valley."

Deliberately he set the candle in a corner of the shack where the unpeeled bark hung in strips from the dry logs.

Instantly a little blaze shot up, ran up the line of bark, and caught the bone-dry moss with which the interstices between the logs were packed. Within a minute that corner of the shack was blazing.

Satisfied that his work would not miscarry, Joe Camp turned to Jim and waved his hand in mocking farewell. He and Labrecque left the shack.

For a moment or two after the pair had gone Jim lay still, paralyzed with horror at his situation. Still, it was Ellen's fate that horrified him far less than the thought of that imminent death. A policeman is schooled to be prepared for whatever may befall him.

His fears lent him renewed strength. Again and again he struggled in his bonds. He succeeded in loosening the rope about his ankles, but that about his wrists could not be budged, nor the strong, knotted bonds about his body.

At last he desisted and lay back, panting, hopeless, watching the progress of the flames with fascinated eyes. The shack was catching fire swiftly. The whole corner of the structure was blazing, and the smoke was filling the interior, and choking him.

Another desperate, hopeless effort to free himself. He was trussed helplessly. The smoke was drifting down and the flames advancing with a crackling roar. Already the heat was beginning to scorch Jim's clothing.

Half-conscious, he shouted again and again at the top of his voice, as though there was someone near to aid him. His struggles smashed the cot, precipitating him to the floor of the shack. But the rope about him pulled him up sharp in the middle of his fall, so that he remained dangling, the middle of his body straining against the rope, while his head and heels hung down, entangled in the debris of the cot.

The whole side of the shack was now ablaze. Sparks were smouldering upon his clothing. His lungs felt bursting. Once more he put all his remaining strength into a desperate attempt to free himself.

His struggles broke the cot into fragments. The rope about his body slipped down to his waist. He hung head downward in the blazing debris.

Suddenly he heard a voice in his ears. Jim was vaguely conscious of hands that lifted him, that slashed the ropes, that bore him through the blazing interior of the shack. After a few moments he opened his eyes, to feel the cold night air blowing on him. Over his head the large, full moon was sailing through the skies.

Ralston was bending over him. Jim struggled to his feet, groaning. His head was reeling. He groped with outstretched arms. Ralston caught him as he was falling.

"Just in the nick of time, Corporal," he said.

Jim straightened himself.

"Where is she?" he cried hoarsely.

"We'll get her. I thought I'd outwitted you, but I didn't reckon on that gang. They've got her in their shack."

"Where?" Jim cried.

"In the next valley, the place where I had my unfortunate altercation with the recluse, that started things. Think you can walk, Roscoe?"

"I'm—all right," Jim gasped.

"Then listen. We've just got time. They won't harm her, not till Joe Camp gets there, anyway, and I passed him ten minutes ago, on his way back from playing this little trick on you. He's fat, and can't walk fast. First, what are the terms, Corporal?"

"Save her. That's all I care."

"Righto. We'll save her, if we can, and let her choose which of us she's going with. And we'll split the gold."

"Damn the gold!"

Ralston laughed in his well-bred way.

"I'm less altruistic than you suppose,

Corporal. That gold's too heavy for one man to get away with it. It would fill my canoe twice, and I don't propose to come back on a second trip. Maybe we'll make our getaway together. Time to arrange that afterward. Here's a gun for you, Roscoe.

"They're drinking together in that shack. There's seven of them. I counted them. Seven, including Joe Camp and Labrecque. If we hurry, maybe we can get there ahead of them, and reduce the odds. Anyway, it'll be a case of getting the drop on them, and wiping out the lot. Think you're game, Corporal?"

"Hurry, for God's sake," whispered Roscoe.

Ralston cast a glance at him, and nodded. He led the way. The valley, studded here and there with stunted birch and willow, afforded cover enough. It was not likely Joe Camp and Labrecque would see them. The two outlaws were in the lead and well on their way toward the recluse's hut.

Roscoe felt his head clearing as he staggered after Ralston through the night. The fire had only singed his hair and clothing, and the effects of the blow he had received were wearing away. It was Labrecque's blows in the face that pained him most. His nose felt broken, his lip was swollen, and there was blood all over him. But the thought of Ellen in the hands of those wretches banished all thought of pain. He followed close on Ralston's heels, urging him to hasten.

They followed the course of the little stream to the dividing ridge, skirting the tunnel where the gold was hidden. They crossed the pass. A light flickered in the distance. Presently the outlines of the hut came into sight. Then they began to hear the outlaws' drunken shouts within.

Jim, gripping his revolver tightly, strode at Ralston's side. The end of the valley was bare of trees, but it quickly became evident that there was no danger of their discovery. The whole band was roaring drunk.

They stopped under the lee of the substantial cabin. The interior was ablaze with candles. The first voice they heard was Joe Camp's.

"Made quick time," muttered Ralston. "I'll give the signal, Roscoe."

"Yeh, I wish I'd stayed to see him frying," the outlaw hiccoughed.

He had evidently had time to get drunk during his return, for all the speed he had made.

"Must be a juicy crisp by now. We'll go back in the morning and view the remains. Where's the girl? Bring her out, damn you!" he shouted.

There was no window through which to look on that side of the shack, but they heard the inner door open, and then Camp's voice again.

"Well, kid, you don't know me, so I'll jest interdooce myself. I'm Joe Camp, the millionaire. I got gold to blow on you, so what you say to a little trip together, starting tomorrow evening, if we can get our share of the gold on board? It'll be Montreal for us, and then maybe Paris, if you're a good kid and kind to Joe. What you got to say about it?"

"Where's Mr. Roscoe? What have you done with him?" came Ellen's voice, steady but strained.

There was a high, breaking note in that voice of hers, as if she was upon the point of madness.

"Corporal Roscoe?" hiccoughed Joe Camp. "Say, don't you worry that pretty head of yours about him, kid. Still, if you want to know, he's turned into steak by now, fine, juicy porterhouse. Yes, I burned him up in that shack of his, so's to get you, kid."

"You—?"

Suddenly, with a scream of laughter that sounded demoniac to the two listeners without, the girl rushed at him. There came an oath from Joe, a scuffle, shouts of drunken laughter from within. All the while Ellen never ceased to scream.

"Damn the little wildcat!" shouted Camp. "Tie her up, Labrecque. We'll give her a taste—"

But Jim could listen no more. Ignoring his companion, with a bound he was at the door, and flung it open wide.

XI

THE outlaws were grouped about Joe Camp and Ellen. Camp had the girl by the arms and was holding her fast and trying to force her backward. She was fighting like a wildcat and screaming.

Upon the man's face was a streak of blood. Labrecque was laughing at his side.

The table in the center of the fairly large room was littered with cards. Candles in the necks of bottles were guttering grease. A bottle, overturned, was disgorging a stream of liquor, whose pungent stench filled the place. The air was thick with smoke.

As Jim burst in, the eyes of Labrecque were the first to meet his own. For a second the half-breed stared at him, stupefied. Then he ripped out an oath. Joe Camp, glancing around, saw the man he had thought dead. Releasing Ellen, he uttered a yell and instinctively sought cover.

That instant of hesitation spelled doom for Labrecque. Jim's first bullet found his brain. The hooch-runner toppled to the floor, dead before he reached it. His fall tipped over the table and sent bottles and candles flying.

The room was plunged into darkness, but not before Jim had emptied his revolver into the midst of the gathering. Ralston was at his side, firing too. Shrieks and howls reverberated through the darkness. And in the welter of dead and dying men the living grappled with the still living.

Almost by instinct Jim found Joe Camp, as the last glimmer of light illumined the room. The fat outlaw, in an agony of rage and fear, flung his arms about his enemy, bearing him to the floor with him. Jim's fingers closed about the throat, heavy with rolls of flesh, and buried themselves in it. The fetid breath hissed in his ear. The hooch-runner, for all his weight, had been of prodigious strength in his earlier days. Jim felt his ribs cracking under that deadly grip. Instinctively Joe Camp was trying to crush his opponent's body, as a bear might do, and instinctively Jim was trying to break the head from the shoulders. With one elbow on the floor for leverage, he succeeded in pinioning Joe Camp's neck in the clutch of his hand, and turned the great head backward.

Back and back he forced the head, while the arms still tightened. Bright lights flickered before Jim's eyes. He felt his senses leaving him. Putting all his force into a last effort, he twisted back the head. A howl that rose above the pandemonium in the hut broke from the outlaw's lips. And, even as he felt consciousness leaving him, Jim managed to wrench Joe's head down to the floor.

The snap of the vertebrae was like a pistol-shot. That was the last Jim knew.

HE opened his eyes in brilliant daylight. He was lying in the open, under a cluster of willows in tiny leaf. Ellen was at his side. As he tried to struggle up she drew his head upon her shoulder, looking into his face with streaming eyes.

He tried to move and found himself enveloped in bandages. He glanced about him. Some men in a well-remembered uniform were at work in the near distance, with spades and picks. One of them strode toward him.

Jim recognized Sergeant Timmins. He looked from him to Ellen, and back again.

"So they found us," he began.

"Oh, hush, Jim, dear, it's all right," Ellen whispered.

Seargeant Timmins looked sheepish.

"Why, Roscoe, I guess this business has straightened out pretty well," he answered. "We struck your trail a few days ago, and planned a night attack on that bunch of outlaws that was gathered here. We thought, of course, that the gang was yours. We were camped a ways down the valley when we heard firing. Got here to find that you and Turner had wiped 'em up clean, but Turner was dying, and you were looking pretty sick."

"Turner?" asked Jim, puzzled.

"That fellow known as Ralston. Well, he made a sort of confession before he went, and it was supplemented by some papers he left behind. It appears he'd known that recluse he killed, in England. Met up with him here again, and, after shooting him for his gold, decided to take his name and some day step into his shoes. Ralston, this little girl's brother, was the gold-miner whom Turner killed. Turner took his name. The gold, of course, is hers and yours, seeing her brother mined it on your land."

Sergeant Timmins was a stupid man, but the deduction that followed was perfectly correct.

"I guess," he said slowly, "you and she ain't going to go to law about the question of ownership."

The Carcajou Killer

By A. de HERRIES SMITH

Bred of long nights on lone patrol, there sometimes comes a madness. Constable Cooke gazed too long on the twisting shadows of darkness, and swore an oath of vengeance—then red rebellion stalked the frozen pathways of the Mounted!

"ATTENTION nothing! To blazes with the Mounted Police! I'm through with this outfit. . . . Ah! You would, eh?"

Constable "Bugs" Cooke leaped out of the line of scarlet tunicked figures, one hand fumbling with the catch of his revolver holster as he ran. Half a dozen bounds and he was behind Staff Sergeant Oliver and with the Webley's muzzle jammed hard into the small of the N.C.O.'s back.

A quiver of surprise ran down the line of men, but they made no move. They were on parade and awaited orders. The same thought pulsed through all their brains. Cooke had been smitten again with the Arctic madness, caused by loneliness and lack of white man's food.

This was the second time now that Bugs

had gone on the rampage since he came in from detachment duty on the Coast. They were beginning to get fed up with his antics, too. Now old Willie Oliver would fix him for good, though.

"Not a move out of you guys!" Cooke warned, as though reading their thoughts. "I'm heading out and I'm not having any company. Get that? Don't want to shoot up any of you boys, but I will if you try trailing me. Remain at attention, the whole mob of you. S'long, Willie, you bellyaching old brat."

Cooke jabbed a farewell into the Sergeant's back and commenced backing across the parade ground toward the jungle of willow scrub and stunted trees that hemmed it in on three sides.

Oliver's leathery, sun-wrinkled face was contemptuous as he watched the man with the revolver pad backward through the dust. But Cooke's thick-set body had no more than disappeared into the bushes than the old veteran broke into sudden energy.

"Parade! Dis-miss!" came the barked order.

The men broke off, flocking forward, but Oliver waved them away. Singling out Corporal Kirby, he waved a curt hand toward where Cooke had disappeared.

"Bring him in," the sergeant ordered. "The rest of you beat it back to the barracks. This is a one-man job. Go to it, Kirby."

"Right." The corporal grinned about him at his comrades as he replied easily, "I'll bring him in on a plate."

Kirby pressed the Stetson firmly down on his head, tightened his belt, and then, revolver in hand, set out at a run. But he was wise to the wilderness ways and had no intention of thrusting a passage in the direction taken by the deserter.

The corporal reached the thick screen of willows, ran along the front of the fringe for perhaps half a dozen yards, then slid out of sight. Ducking his head to avoid the stinging withes and moving sideways so that their swishing would not betray him, he progressed slowly and carefully.

ALL at once the corporal's eyes caught sight of two camp robber birds fluttering about from branch to branch some dozen yards away. He halted at once. Kirby knew that the gray-blue thieves had little fear of humans. From their eager actions he sensed that the birds were watching someone making camp.

Flattened down in the damp moss, Kirby wriggled forward through the willows until he was looking out on a little flat, rimmed by stunted poplar trees and through which a small creek ran.

The camp robber birds had made no mistake. There was a man there but he was not engaged in making camp. It was Bugs Cooke. A birchbark canoe was lying on the marshy bank and the deserter was hastily stowing some small canvas grub sacks in the vessel.

"Well, we'll see how bad this hombre really is," Kirby said to himself, still inclined to credit Cooke with the Arctic madness rather than a vicious disposition.

The corporal slid back into the bushes, propped his Stetson carefully on one of the willows, then coughed.

Cr—ack! Cr—ack!

Cooke's reply was instantaneous. He whirled about from the canoe and sent two shots winging out. The first punctured the peaked shape of the police hat and toppled it off the willow. Kirby emitted a loud groan, then got up on his hands and knees when the other man stepped forward cautiously.

With the gun held before him the deserter pried the bushes apart with his left hand, staring into the maze of stems.

Whug! The muzzle of Kirby's revolver thudded down on Cooke's outstretched wrist, and a split-second later the two Mounties were threshing about among the willow stems.

The corporal had the advantage of surprise and he used it mercilessly. There was that in the other man's eyes that told him Cooke had been transformed into a killer and would spare no one in his effort to desert.

Both revolvers lay in the moss and neither man made any effort to reach them. Over and over they rolled, sending in short-armed jabs. Cooke butted savagely with his head at Kirby's face, with the corporal holding away as well as he was able and still flailing down with that hard fist.

Roaring breaths filled the little glade, drowning the frogs' chorus and the birds'

chirruping. Willows swished as the two bodies were flung against them but neither man spoke.

Kirby managed to get halfway up on his knees. Then, with the fingers of his right hand twisted in the collar of Cooke's tunic, he drew back the other arm.

"Had enough!" the deserter choked out. Get . . . you . . . another time, Smiler Kirby. Let go!"

The corporal got up on his feet, quickly picked up the two revolvers and moistened his thickened lips. A moment later a shrill whistle pierced the heat-laden air. Cooke laughed pantingly, but continued to lie on the ground until voices sounded and three men crashed a passage through the willows.

The deserter held out his wrists for the handcuffs gripped in Sergeant Oliver's fist and laughed again—a throaty, insane chuckle that sent understanding glances passing back and forth from one Mountie to the other.

TORMENTED by flies and heat, ten days later, Cooke still paced backward inside the crib, termed, by courtesy, the guardroom. Each hour in its passing found him more sullen and determined.

The little settlement slept the noonday heat away. Moonfaced Eskimos stretched in the shade cast by their skin tupiks. Panting huskies wallowed in the mud beneath the willow bushes. Traders lounged in the cool darkness of their stores; behind cheesecloth screening that shut out the thudding flies.

All at once one of the drowsing Eskimos jerked alert, and a dog yelped when the door of the wireless station clanged. A figure raced across the "street," hard packed by many moccasins. Another door banged when the Mounted Police constable flung himself into the barracks, and was greeted by a wide variety of oaths.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, can it," Oliver appealed as a long, sweat-dampened arm reached out of his bunk. There came the crackling of paper, and a moment later the Sergeant was out on the floor, padding barefooted over to the window.

"War, bloody war!" Oliver groaned. "Hey, Tom Kirby, roll out here. Your doom is sealed. Come on; show some life."

A second figure joined the sergeant's. Corporal Kirby was dressed in the lower half of a cotton pajama suit that amplified his wide shoulders, narrow waist, and the swinging walk of a cavalry-man.

Brown fingers plucked the telegram from his superior's hand. Kirby rumpled his hair in mock dismay as blue eyes ran over the typewritten sheet. Then he laughed. The corporal had a trick of laughing no matter what happened and now he found something delightfully amusing in the picture of Inspector Woodcock —the Hot Bird—marooned on a sandbar in the middle of the Mackenzie. There would be plenty of mosquitoes, too.

The wireless message was curt and definite. It read:

Staff Sergeant Oliver,
Royal Canadian Mounted Police,
Kittarack.
Mail schooner broke propeller, about fifty miles south of Carcajou rapids. Have money for Indian treaty payments.
Send relief at once. Waiting.
Woodcock, Inspector.

"You won't think it so damned funny walloping down there in the patrol boat," Sergent Oliver grunted, when Kirby sasshayed across the floor, fluttering his hands in mirthful gestures. "The Hot Bird must have sent one of his crew down to Fort Simpson with that message. Lord! He'll be mad. You'll pull out right away and shoot the old *Chipewyan* to Carcajou in record time or there'll be two stripes missing off your tunic. Pick a man to accompany you and show some action."

Those others of the detachment who had been sitting upright on their bunks, drinking in the news of Hot Bird's predicament, at once flattened themselves again. Young Tom Kirby had the reputation of getting to places in a hurry and none of the men were overly anxious to be baked alive in the river's trough.

"I'll take 'Bugjuice' Cooke," Kirby said suddenly, wheeling about to face the sergeant. Six sighs of relief answered him.

"You know Cooke's in the jug," Oliver answered acidly. "Pick again."

"No. That cast iron shanty is no place for a man in this weather, even if he is a bad egg," the corporal retorted. "I've got a hunch that if 'Bugjuice' gets half a chance he'll come back. Let me take him, Sarge. The responsibility is

mine, and I'll see that he returns all right."

The sergeant emptied his lungs of hot air, fumbled with his belt, and a key jangled on the bare board floor.

"It's your funeral," Oliver grunted. "Mind, though, he's your prisoner and you'll account for him. All right; get out."

"ALL right, Bugs, let's go," said Kirby cheerily to the glowering man squatting in the stifling guard house.

Half an hour's arguing had convinced Cooke that what the corporal said was really true. He, Bugs Cooke, the traditional bad actor of the Arctic command, was to be released from the pen and trail down the river.

The constable shook himself, got to his feet, and shuffled out into the blistering sunshine at Kirby's heels.

Feeling that if the man were left alone he would gradually work out of his surly frame of mind, Kirby took no notice of the other, except to offer curt instructions about the engine at times, as the old *Chipewyan* thrust her way down stream between wide, marshy banks. These, after a time, gave way to shale cliffs. The river narrowed and with it the sun beat down into the trough, making the heat well-nigh unbearable.

Cooke sluiced the hot decks occasionally with a bucket of water, and Kirby stamped his feet gratefully in the flow as he stood at the wheel, following the twisting channel that zigzagged from bank to bank.

"Boat ahead," Cooke grunted at the other man, late that evening, just about when the corporal was thinking it was time to pull in and cook supper.

"Who is it?" Kirby asked.

Cooke humped his heavy shoulders, making no effort to enlighten the non-com. That was about the tenth time that the erstwhile prisoner had shrugged aside his attempts at conversation. Kirby's teeth snapped shut, as he spun the wheel and steered straight for the other vessel, where she was tied to the bank underneath an overhanging clump of spruce trees.

Bump!

Cooke had been slow in obeying Kirby's order to shut off the engine, and the police boat hit the other vessel a sound thump. A roar of curses volleyed out of the stranger's cabin as the corporal leaped ashore to make the *Chipewyan's* shore line fast to the trees.

"Who the hell d'ya think you—"

A little, bottle-shouldered man, leathery face flecked with two piercing eyes, was up at the corporal. Wisps of long hair hung down over his ears, but otherwise his head was bald, and tanned a rich brown by the sun. He did not finish the sentence. The rat eyes leaped from one Mountie to another, then the thin slit of a mouth widened out into a grin.

"Cripes! Bugjuice' Cooke," the stranger's thin, nasal voice came again. "Last time I sees you, you're in the pen an' now here you's sailin' the ocean wide—"

Ratty Nugren let the sentence go unfinished. He caught Kirby's face, unsmiling now. It came to him suddenly that the corporal still harbored malice about that affair of the raided trap lines. Better lie low. Never could tell what this guy Kirby was after anyhow.

"You're a long way from home, Chris," the corporal said easily as he stepped across Nugren's deck and reached the patrol boat. There was a suggestion of inquiry in the tone, which the other ignored.

"Time for supper, Bugs," the Mountie added, nodding to his companion. "I'll make the fire in the galley if you'll fry some bacon and beans."

"Ain't hungry." Cooke shook his head, and made no effort to rise from where he was squatting. Nugren's quick eyes darted from one to the other, and the corners of his fish mouth curled.

Kirby stared down at Cooke for a long moment. His lips hardened, then pursed all at once. He whistled cheerily, clumping down the short stairway to the cruiser's spotless little cabin.

Presently blue smoke ebbed up from the galley pipe. The whistling continued. Cooke and Nugren had flattened out on the deck, idly watching the shadows steal down over the white shapes of the cut bank above the blue-black spruce trees, as the flaming sun disappeared.

"Sweet old life up here, ain't it?" Nugren said at length, squirting a deft stream of tobacco juice overboard. "In the winter fifty below an' poundin' dogs all over the map. In the summer bakin' on this here river. Me, I'm goin' out to get a sniff

of salt water. Hey, Bugs, think of it. The ships boomin' into Vancouver harbor, them rose gardens in Stanley Park, an' all them janes flittin' around. Sounds slick, eh?"

"Dry up, or I'll grind that yellow mug of yours into the deck!" Cooke threw out in cold fury. A maniac light glinted in his eyes, the muscles ridged up along the constable's powerful neck, as he jerked into a sitting posture, and glared across at the other boat.

"Oh, hell!" Ratty intoned softly. He humped narrow shoulders in disgust and sent another stream of tobacco juice out into the swirling river.

CORPORAL KIRBY was jolted out of a deep sleep with a realization that something was amiss. Though midnight, the six months' Arctic day was bright outside and he was vaguely aware that two forms moved in the cabin. Two!

A quick twist carried his hand back to where the service revolver was placed on the bunk behind him. Too late!

A flying shape hurtled across the little cabin. Iron fingers closed over his wrist. The Webley was wrenched out of his grasp, and a split-second later the muzzle was pressing steadily against his ribs.

Kirby never indulged in false heroics; many a slip out of a tight corner had showed him the foolishness of action without thought. He lay still.

"All right, Tom; get up," Cooke's voice came out of the half-light. "Listen," he went on, tones rumbling and harsh. "You treated me okay and I'll do the same by you. Make no mistake, though; I'll fill you with hot lead if you try anything."

Kirby made no reply. He swung his legs to the deck, a quick glance telling him that Nugren was armed, too. Cooke let the revolver drop and backed over to the little table in the center of the cabin. There he sat with the gun on his knee, surly face defiant.

"I'll tell him, eh?" Ratty asked his comrade. Bugs nodded without speaking.

"This is how she goes," the little man informed the white-faced corporal. "I'm on my way down to meet your friend Woodcock an' the treaty payments. There's a good five thousand bucks aboard that mail boat. Well, I'll cut it short. Me an' Bugs is goin' to grab that coin, hit over the mountains into Alaska an' show ourselves a good time."

MUCH against his will, Ratty Nugren was at the *Chipewyan's* wheel as the patrol boat churned on down the Mackenzie. He would have much preferred to be lazing away the time in the lee of the deck house but Kirby had refused to steer. Hence the trader was forced to stand in the blazing sun, while Cooke mounted guard over his former comrade.

The corporal was apparently little concerned with his plight. He stood leaning against the deck house, Stetson tilted, staring down the river. Behind him Cooke stood rigidly, one hand holding the heavy revolver.

Kirby's whistle sounded out above the engine's thrumming. He had been whistling all the afternoon, and Cooke felt vaguely disturbed. From long association he knew the corporal well and was aware that it would not be like him to give up without making a fight for it. But what could he do? Tom had been told plainly enough that he'd get a bullet hole in his hide if he started anything. This was no time for soft feelings, either. If they didn't pull this thing off right, it would mean a long spell behind the bars. The constable shuddered when he thought of it.

"There's the Wolverine River," Kirby said suddenly, pointing westward to an opening between the hills, with far beyond, the Rockies' snow-tipped crests. "Only a few miles now to Carcajou. Better think it over, Bugs."

"Say, lay off that stuff," Cooke growled. "Don't go with me worth a hoot. I'm through with the police an' you know it. I told you where I'm going an' what I'm going to do. Shove around, Kirby."

The corporal shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He laughed grimly to himself and re-commenced a soft whistling of *Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here.*

"Cripes! There she is!" A sudden yelp from Nugren sent the other two men's gazes down the river. They were just rounding a rocky buttress, revealing a long river reach ahead. There, close to the south bank, and tilted to an acute angle on a sandbar, lay the mail boat, white sides shining against the brown shore line.

"THAT'S her," Ratty's voice came again. "I'll run this barge right smack into her, Bugs. The Hot Bird is your meat. Remember what his kind done to you. Let him have it. But watch Kirby. I'll make a dive for the mail boat's deck just as soon's we bump."

The mail boat was in plain view now, growing larger every moment. A sudden blast of her compressed air hooter saluted the *Chipewyan* as the old boat barged across the water toward the stranded vessel.

There was a long moment's tense silence, broken only by the engine's drumming in the cabin below. All at once the void was shattered by two shouted words—curt, emphatic.

"Parade! 'Shun!"

The two barked words left Kirby's lips almost together, as he whirled about, facing the constable. The well-nigh buried instincts of discipline and service in fighting units under two flags surged unbidden through Cooke's body. Though his brain cried, "It's a trick!" his muscles obeyed the order in spite of him.

Bugs Cooke came stiffly erect, hands dropped to his sides as the man snapped to attention!

In that moment the grinning corporal sprang past, long legs carrying him toward Christopher Nugren in flying leaps. Ratty had let go his grip on the wheel; was bending to pick up the revolver that he had carefully placed on the deck at his feet.

Crash!

The impact of the boats threw the three on the *Chipewyan* sprawling on the deck. But Kirby did no more than bounce! He was on his feet and on tpo of Nugren before the trapper had time to utter a cry.

A knee in the pit of Ratty's stomach suddenly halted the trapper's urge to reach for the revolver. With a yelped threat that twisted his mouth into a dog-like grin, the little man flung himself upright, teeth bared.

Now Nugren's seldom washed talons were tearing at Kirby's wrists. With a snort of mingled disgust and dismay Kirby tore his hands away from Nugren's throat, gripped his long hair by the tufts that sprouted out on either side of his skull.

The corporal came half to his knees, dragging Nugren with him. Then a swinging downward drive, a resounding thud on the deck planking and the trapper's hands relaxed and fell away.

Kirby got to his feet. He stood there swaying backward and forward as if drunk, lungs roaring, blinking the salty sweat out of his eyes.

The corporal glanced down at the unconscious Nugren, picked up the revolver and, stifling his rasping lungs, leaped across to the mailboat. A shout of protest from the men greeted his arrival. Cooke swung about, the revolver hanging limply against his leg.

"Wrong boat, Bugs," Kirby laughed at him. "This is the *Argo,* the Arctic Trading company's old barge. Anyhow, we're a good twenty miles from where the Hot Bird is hung up."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" The constable's tones became belligerent again, all at once. His fingers tightened on the revolver, but made no attempt to lift the weapon. Kirby's Webley was still at the hip.,

"What I'm going to do doesn't matter a hoot," the corporal replied easily. "What I'm going to say does, though. This: when we meet old Woodcock I'm going to tell him that yon put Ratty Nugren out of business and that in my opinion you're a hell of a good man. I'm forgetting everything else. You're not half as tough as you think you are, Bugs. Anyhow, you're from Iowa and that counts with me. Ram that gat in your holster and then get back on the *Chipewyan* and tie up that baldheaded object. I've got to fix things with this crowd."

Cooke's face turned from sickly white to red. He stammered, but no words came. With wide eyes still on Kirby's smiling face he slowly sheathed the revolver.

"Not right to let these youngsters go out on detachment duty all alone," Kirby rumbled to himself. "The Arctic's bound to get them; bound to."

A volley of shouted queries was aimed at the corporal as he walked toward the group of men at the rail. Kirby seated himself on the gunwale, and waved a hand for silence. Five minutes later the traders were all laughing.

Builders of Empire

By FREDERICK L. NEBEL

Iron man, self-made lord of the Yukon wilderness—sourdoughs swore that Brad King's heart was harder than his flinty fists. Yet, for a gruff flash of praise they scaled sleet-mountains, bucked blinding blizzards, died beside white trails. . . . An Epic of the Northland!

IT was a rough, hard-handed wind that blew across Tegish Lake that night and boomed among the tents and shacks on the wooded shore. The wind had in it the icy touch of death. It flayed the campfires, whirled sparks and red living coals in the darkness, hammered the dark shapes of men who toiled from tent to tent or shack to shack. It was the bull-throated, two-fisted challenge of the North slamming down from the glacial peaks, warning those who had scaled Chilcoot and run the ice-locked lakes that they still had death and desolation to contend with on the long raw haul to Dawson and the creeks of gold.

In sharp contrast with the primordial outcry of the wilds, there was gayety in Hymie Freedman's trading store that crouched log-walled in the swaying, wind tortured trees. Here came the hardened trail-pounders, the chechakos, the good, the bad and the negative. Here was warmth hurled out by two fat-bellied stoves. Here was liquor at one dollar a drink—winter

Complete Northland Novel

beards on tawny faces, dirty moosehide, talk of trails and gold and empty boasts by men who had yet to meet the onslaught of the Yukon trail.

Hymie Freedman, one-time Seattle merchant, stood behind his counter by his cash-box, doled out liquor, smiled with ferret-eyes. His shelves were piled with provisions. Sacks of flour stood at either end of the counter. There were cheap watches, novelties, patent medicines, dog-whips, old magazines—anything and everything that might attract the eye of Indian packers or white men loose with cash.

Jens Anderson, Swede trail eater, sat on a barrel and pumped his old accordion. Queenie Carrera, for two years the toast of the trails from tide water to Dawson, flashed dark diamond-pointed eyes and clicked castanets in a slippery Spanish dance. Fifty pairs of eyes followed every movement, hung eagerly on every smile—and rough-shod feet tapped to the melody of the accordion.

BUT those dark fiery eyes of Queenie's forever sought the brooding, sullen eyes of a tall, lean, broad-shouldered man

who lounged indolently against the counter with a tot of liquor idle in his hand. A sealskin cap was on his head, ear-flaps tied up. A long beaver-skin coat, worth a fortune in any country, hung open from his shoulders. One hand was thrust into a woolen jacket pocket. He was a young man, but there were lines in his face, a weariness that was not physical but mental—and a hardness. He had come in a few mintues before, muttered a few greetings, ordered a drink by himself. And directly after he had entered, Queenie Carrera had swung into the dance.

She finished in a whirling cadence of motion, spinning up to the counter beside the man. Her teeth flashed, her dark eyes sparkled. She swept a glass from the counter and raised it, and she shouted:

"To the king of the Yukon Trail—to Braddock King—I dance and drink!"

The glass swept to her lips. On the lips of Braddock King came a twisted look of contempt. A deep brooding fire moved darkly in his eyes. Cheers rose from lusty voices, and glasses rose to meet frost-bit lips that drank to Queenie Carrera's toast.

But King did not drink. He poured the contents of his glass on the floor, and held the glass upturned, looking at it.

Queenie's face blanched. Her glass fell from her lips and crashed to the floor. Her breast heaved tumultuously. Her red lips flattened against her teeth, and a blazing fire rose in her eyes, and white crescents of rage appeared on her nostrils.

Suddenly she spun, snatched up a whip from the counter. She sprang back, her whole body quivering, her lips writhing sinuously against bared teeth. Her arm went up, shot forward. The whip snaked out and cracked across King's cheek. His face froze, his lips tightened. Again the whip sizzled through space and cracked across his cheek, and there were two welts there now, stark against a face that had gone deadly white, fiercely frigid.

Before she was able to strike again King sprang forward, grabbed her arm, swung down violently, twisted the wrist; snapped:

"Drop it, you cat!"

"Cat—am I? Yes, that I am!" She heaved and twisted, while King remained motionless on arched legs, playing with her strength. And her own fury—not his strength—drove her to her to knees, where she crouched panting, breathing maledictions between writhing lips.

A man leaped from the crowd, fists doubled. He was a young man, blond, tall, in the first white flush of youth; an outsider, a chechako, blue eyes storming with wrath.

"Let her go—you!"

King looked up, unruffled. "Stay out of this."

"Let—her—go!"

King eyed him with an impersonal gray stare. "I told you to stay out of this."

The young man came closer, jaw squared. "You dirty coward! You rat! Let go of that woman!"

King narrowed his eyes. "This is my affair, son—not yours. When you're in this country a little longer you'll learn to mind your own damned business!"

With a choked cry the man sprang and his fist shot out and crashed against King's jaw. King reeled backward, letting go of the woman, and banged against the counter. The outsider, driven by the impetus of his rage, followed up with a right-handed shot that hit King's chin with sufficient force to snap back his head.

King straightened, set his lips. Cold gray fire burned in his eyes. He sprang sidewise to avoid another rush, brought up his left and slammed it against the outsider's ear. The outsider stumbled but did not fall. He swung around, dived again, struck out, blind with fury. King dodged, snapped a short blow into the man's stomach, followed with a terrific right to the man's jaw. That blow stopped the outsider in mid-career. For a split-moment he stood poised, his eyes glassy. Then he buckled and plunged to the floor.

King relaxed. For a moment he stared at the outsider, lips grim, eyes shuttered, lean cheeks drawn in. Then he looked up and placed his eyes on Queenie Carrera who had risen and was crouching breathless against the counter.

King said, "This is not the only weak one who fell for you—this poor fool. And then you—*you* had the gall to try and drink with *me!* You . . . after poor young Simmonds! After—go on, you dance-hall cat!" Bitter contempt was in his voice, in his eyes.

Abruptly he turned to Hymie Freedman. "Some water. This kid's not hurt bad."

Freedman said, "Ach!" and came hurrying around the counter with a jug of water.

King took the jug and poured some water over the outsider's face. He knelt down beside him, soaked a handkerchief, and mopped the outsider's forehead. No one spoke. Every man in the store remained motionless, and there was no sound but the racket of the wind riding roughshod over the cabin.

PRESENTLY the silence was broken by the opening of the door. A girl came in. She was muffled in a huge fur coat, and wisps of golden hair escaped from the rim of a knitted green toque. At sight of the man on the floor she gasped, then ran forward, fell to her knees.

"What—what happened?" she cried.

King looked at her. "Know him?"

"He's my brother! Oh, what happened?"

King stood up slowly. He began buttoning his coat, and looked very somber and thoughtful. He started toward the door.

Queenie Carrera cried, "You better go!" And then shouted at the girl. "That man struck him down! That is the man! Look at him crawl away now!" She put her hands on her hips, sneered, "Ah, the great Brad King—the Yukon millionaire—the king of the Yukon trail—the man with the iron nerve—the *great* Brad King!"

King stopped at the door, his hand on the knob. He did not turn. They saw only his broad fur-clad back, motionless, a little tense. Some of the men eyed that back with envy, with malice, with hate, for King was a great man, his name was a legend in the North.

Queenie raved on, "And that man, he insulted me and almost broke my arm! And then, yes, because your brother interfered in my behalf, this man King battered him down. A bruiser! A cheap brawler, a bully! He thinks he is law unto himself. I will show him! I have power in the Yukon, too. I hate him." Her voice grated, her knotted fists shook, her breath pumped from her nostrils. *"I will break him!"*

Men's voices rumbled. One broke out with—"Miss Carrera's right. This big guy King got fresh. We were just about to lam him when your brother busted in. We heard o' him before, him and his high-handed—"

King pivoted. His eyes speared the speaker. His voice was low, deep and throbbed a bit: "You were about to lam me? You or anybody else here hasn't the plain ordinary guts to lam a pup. Talk, little man—talk! Crawl away and hide your face. And anybody else who feels that way. Yes—you've heard of me.

"You've had my warning—that there's famine spreading in the north. And though you all hate me, despise me because I made my fortune in this dirty land, I'll warn you again—turn back, go back to salt water. You'll die of starvation before the winter's out. You saw my outfit, my brigade of fifteen sleds and a hundred dogs. That's grub for my town—for New Hope—for the men who are working my mines and building my houses for next year. They'll not starve, I'll see to that. But no one else is preparing against this famine—and no one else will horn in on the food that I'm lugging down the Dawson trail. Get me. Take warning. Or your bones will fertilize the Klondike muck when spring comes round."

A cracked old voice cackled, "Yeah, we been hearin' that preachin' stuff all the way from Dyea."

King said, "As a favor, I'll see you get a decent burial."

The outsider was groaning on the floor. The girl held his head in an arm, and looked up at King.

"Oh, I've heard of you, too. Everybody's heard of you. And I've heard you were a brute, a ruthless gold king, a despot. Go—go—get out."

He said, "Madam, if I ever see you again I hope by that time you will have learned more lies about me."

He yanked open the door. The wind drove in great clouds of snow that hissed on the floor. King plunged out into the white smother, banging the door behind him.

II

THREE men sat around a split-log table in a cabin a quarter-mile up the shore from the trading store. There was a bottle of gin on the table. The men played cards listlessly, without interest, merely to kill time.

One was Bertie Browne. He was the smallest of the three, had dirty tousled hair that was mud-colored, a chubby face, pale blue eyes, thin crisp lips, and a peremptory manner that no one ever paid any attention to. Once Bertie had been a junior clerk in a shipping house in the West India Dock Road. The man on his left was thick-featured, barrel-chested, swart, and bore all the ear-marks of a killer. He was just that. They called him Joe Angelo, and he had run a gang of San Francisco dock rats before the police got wise.

The other man was Sard Caig, blue-jawed, lean and lank and heavy-boned, with more intelligence in one blue hard eye than the others showed in four. He was a honkatonk boss, a gambler when in the mood, and as a sideline it was rumored that he robbed claims and had men put out of the way who interfered with him. He held forth in Jackman Crossing, a tough town across the river from New Hope, a town that laughed at the law and anybody who pretended to respect it.

Caig said in his hard blunt voice, "I hear King pulled in this afternoon with his big outfit."

"Yeah," nodded Bertie Browne. "'E pulled in, alright. I ain't never seen such a what you might call a pretentious outfit. 'E's all steamed up about this famine."

"Ah-r-r," rumbled Angelo. "Famine! Famine! Dat's justa cheap talk. Watcha t'ink, Sard?"

"Dunno. The wolves have been on the war path, and that's a sign. Your raise or call, Joe."

"'E's a queer bloke, this King," said Bertie.

Caig said, "Yeah. I heard him yap down in Dyea about this famine of his. It's got a lot of guys worried. It ain't got me worried." He chuckled. "Hell, if it hits us in Jackman we can raid his supplies. I don't like that bum, anyhow. But, say, there ain't going to be no famine. Raise you two, Bertie."

The door blew open and Queenie came in with a blast of wind and snow. She kicked the door shut and threw back her parka hood. Angelo's black eyes sparkled. Bertie half rose to make a mock-formal bow. Caig shifted his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and said:

"Walking for your health, kid?"

"For my health!" she laughed and tossed her head. "You listen to me, Sard—that Brad King—" She clicked her teeth and came to the table. She struck it with her fist. "He insulted me!"

Angelo made a guttural sound in his throat and jumped up.

"Where de hell is he?"

"Sap," said Caig, "sit down."

Angelo sat down slowly.

Caig looked at Queenie. "He did, eh? That's too bad."

"I mean it!" cried Queenie furiously. "I made the toast to him and what did he do? Ah! Poured his drink on the floor at my feet!"

"You always had a weakness for that guy, Queenie," said Caig.

She slashed a hand through the air. "I have no more! I hate him! I would spit on his face. I would do anything to ruin him, to break him. Ever since that fool stupid friend of his Simmonds shot himself because of me, King insults me any chance he gets. You listen to me, Sard. I have the contract to sing and dance in your honkatonk. I will break it!"

"You can't!" banged out Caig, darkening.

Angelo jumped up. "I'll go round and beat-a dat bum up!"

"You sit down!" snapped Caig; he added, "*You*—beat him up! That's a laugh. Sit down, I said!"

Angelo writhed back upon the chair. Bertie sniffed and looked piously at his hands. Caig glared at Queenie.

"What's eating you, woman? I'm paying you good money, and with you I can drag all the trade from New Hope. You can't let me down. Why the hell do you mess around King when you know he hates you like poison? You know you made young Simmonds do the Dutch. Stay away from King. Besides"—he smiled craftily—"I'm kind of sweet on you myself kid—and I've got lots of dinero."

QUEENIE placed her hands palm down on the table, leaned on the rigid arms, fixed Caig with black mutinous eyes. "You know, Sard, that he is your old enemy. One time he had the big fight with you, and you got the black eye—eh?"

Caig's eyes shimmered wickedly. "Lay off, kid."

"Ah—you do, remember! And he owns New Hope. He will make a big town of it, and before long you will see that Jackman will be—nothing. He has the money, the power—he has. Is he not backing with his money the great new trading post there? Is he not backing the new saloon? He will crush you. Oh, not with his hands, Sard. No. Just by making New Hope the biggest town on the great river. Then—eh, then?—what will become of Sard Caig?"

Caig bored her with his hard brutal eyes. Not a muscle in his blue-jawed face twitched. Angelo reached over and tapped his arm.

"Sard, whatcha say I kill-a dat bum?"

"Ow, I'y off that!" complained Bertie.

Caig was still staring at Queenie. "You finished?"

"I am not finished!" she whispered sibilantly. "You do not know the story about this very long trek of his for the food? I will tell you. At New Hope one old trapper, Pop Hunker, he got it in his head that there wolud be the great famine. Over and over he kept saying it, until the men who work in King's mines and the men who are building up his town, they became suspicious. Pop Hunker he would quote from the Bible, and he would warn them. He gave his reasons, too, he did, this old man. He has been in the North, they say, these twenty years, and he has prophesied four famines that have happened. So the men became restless, and many wanted to go to the Outside—until King himself he got up and said he would drive a great brigade to Dyea and return with plenty food. That he did."

Caig snapped. "Where'd you hear this?"

She laughed softly. "From a man from New Hope who was thick with the rum."

"Well—" Caig broke off and scowled at the table. "Well, what about it?"

She leaned over, so that her face was very close to his, and her fingers tapped playfully on his wrist.

"If," she whispered archly, "all that food which he has . . . if that did not reach New Hope . . . these men would go out . . . the mines would close down . . . the town would languish . . . while Jackman would boom. . . ."

"Strike me pink, now—I s'y, strike me if Spanish ain't got a bloomin' 'ead on 'er shoulders!"

Angelo grinned wolfishly. "Yeah—and me, say I kill-a dat bum."

"You," rasped Caig, "close your wop jaw!" Then he stood up, peered hard at Queenie, flattened his lips against his teeth. Deep in his eyes twin fires smoldered.

Queenie stepped back, primped her hair, smiled. "Is that not right, Sard?"

Caig brought his fist down hard against the table. He said nothing. But his fist remained there. And his eyes remained glued on Queenie.

III

BRADDOCK KING'S great brigade was encamped in a clump of trees beyond the edge of the settlement. The big Yukon sleds, laden with provisions, had been swung four abreast for the night, while the hundred thick-haired, strong-limbed dogs had been tethered well beyond reach of the food.

Between the dogs and the sleds were the tents and the campfires of King's two dozen men. Eighteen of them were big-shouldered Indians and six were white men, all working at fancy prices. Farther south, at Sheep Camp, five miles below Chilcoot, King had taken on fifty men and discharged them at Lake Linderman.

The campfires waved red liquid banners in the night and shone on the faces of white men and Indians lounging on blankets, some talking, others smoking in silence. Light danced among the dark-trunked trees, and the crests heaved and whistled in the wind.

Soft robes lay on the floor of King's tent, and a small collapsible stove showed a red band of warmth around its middle. A lantern hung at the end of a string suspended from the ridge pole. King lay back against a blanket roll, hands clasped behind his head, blue flannel shirt open at his corded, muscular neck. A pipe stuck from one corner of his mouth, clamped between hard teeth, and his eyes were narrowed thoughtfully.

Doc Morrow sat cross-legged opposite him. A broad, heavy-set man, with sweeping gray hair, a big but gentle face, studded with gentle blue eyes, mustache neat, gray. Morrow was fifty, twenty years older than

King, and he was on King's payroll to take care of sick men and sick dogs. Two years before the Doc had been a drunkard.

He said in his low, soft voice, "I wouldn't let that woman upset you, Brad."

King growled, "That slut!"

"No matter. I wouldn't let her upset you."

"I can't look at her without wanting to choke her! She's poison to all men. She'll do anything for gold. Poor Buddy Simmonds!"

He snatched the pipe from his mouth and his hand bunched around the hot bowl.

"He was my friend, Doc! He was young and romantic, as clean a lad as ever came into the North. He kept my books for me, managed my business when I was on the trail—and that night in the bar when that crazy half-breed came to knife me it was Buddy who jumped in the way of that knife and took it through his shoulder. And then she came to my town on her way south, and Buddy fell for her—she bewitched him. He left me, left the career I had mapped out for him, took all the money he'd saved and went with her to Cossia Bar. And there she met 'Duke' Connolly, the gambler, and when she had borrowed or spent all Buddy's money, she left with the Duke for White Horse. They told me how Buddy begged her not to leave, and how she laughed at him—and how next day he put a bullet through his brain. Poor fool of a kid!" His voice ended scarce above a husky whisper.

Morrow wagged his gray old head. "It's done, Brad. You mustn't think about it too much."

"Hell!" snapped King, gray eyes flashing. "The woman's worse than a plague! Did she have to show off in the trading store tonight? And that young fool there—standing up for her. And he with a beautiful sister—God help him if Queenie Carrera gets her claws in the chum!"

"You've not time to worry about other people, Brad."

King's voice tightened. "You're right. I haven't. I've got a name for being a cold-blooded despot, Doc, and I suppose I should live up to it. I'm the most hated man in the North—and the richest. Six years ago I was a pauper. Life, eh? Now I'm called the King of the Yukon trail, the Gold Baron of the North.

"I buy my friendships with my gold. Don't tell me!" he rapped out when Morrow started to raise a hand. "All right, I'll buy my friendships with gold. Meantime I've got to watch my back—and my gold. I made my money—alone. And today I'm the loneliest man in all the North. No one thinks so. They all envy me. When I was poor I had old sourdoughs and bums for friends—if you call them friends. At least I had companionship. Now even they envy me—and hate me." He raised his fist, shook it. "To hell with them all!"

MORROW'S eyes were gentle on the young gold king. And he might have seen behind the arrogance one flicker of agony in the gray eyes. He knew, this hale old man, the depths of King's loneliness. He remembered King's long, brooding silences, sometimes followed by mad, hysterical gayety. He was used to King's bitter outbursts. And he was almost certain that no man had ever come closer to understanding King than he himself.

He said, "Believe it or not, Brad, I'm your friend. Over and above everything. You saved me from destruction—you helped me regain the dignity I once had, you took a wreck of a man—"

"Forget it," muttered King. "You were valuable. I needed a doctor in my town to take care of the men working for me and to look after my dogs. You're worth your weight in gold."

"Only for my professional services, Brad?"

King scowled down at his pipe. "Time will tell. . . . By the way, how's that swing-dog's foot?"

"Eh—all right, better—yes, better, Brad." Morrow blinked his eyes wistfully and stopped a sigh at his lips.

King rose and stepped outside the tent. Above him the cold stars hung low in the night-blue bowl of the sky, and the Aurora was pulsing up from the polar rim. The trees rocked and creaked. The wind boomed afar, shrilled close at hand, twisted the campfires, drummed snow dust against the tent.

Some of the men lay on their backs. Others spoke, and their low, casual voices drifted to King. The laden sleds loomed in the darkness. The grub brigade. King

had been laughed at, scorned, ridiculed—and Doc Morrow had told a crowd at Sheep Camp that King was making history.

A MAN rose from beside one of the campfires and came rocking toward the King.

"When do we start, Brad?"

"Six, Slim. You and the boys get up before that, have the cook rustle breakfast, and you line up the dogs. But we'll shove off at six. Doc says that swing-dog's foot is better."

"Yeah, I seen." Slim Drone, trail boss, made red eye of his pipe bowl glow, then said, "I hear Sard Caig and his boys are in camp."

"They must have made good time from Dyea."

"Yeah. Queenie Carrera's with them. She's goin' to strut at Caig's honkatonk this winter."

King made his lips smile. "There'll be a hot time in Jackman, Slim."

"Yeah, sure will. . . . Well, six then. That's jake. G' night, boss."

Drone turned and slushed back to his campfire.

King bent down and pushed into his tent. "Think I'll turn in, Doc."

Morrow said, "Me, too. Did Drone say Caig's in camp?"

"Yes."

Morrow stared at the floor, started to say something else, but changed his mind and tapped out his pipe.

"Think I'll turn in, too," he said.

IV

DAYS later found the grub brigade moving like a long serpent out of the mouth of Forty-Mile River and onto the broad expanse of Lake La Barge. Lake La Barge is a rowdy lake. The wind always blows a gale there, open or ice-locked water.

King tramped at the head of his outfit beside the trail-boss Slim Drone. He wore a caribou-skin parka, the hood up around his head, and moccasins of soft moosehide that came up almost to his knees. Behind him, a hundred dogs hauled at fifteen huge sleds, and two dozen men tramped at handle-bars or beside the sleds. Doc Morrow was somewhere down near the sixth sled, head buried in his parka hood against the drive of the ice-fanged wind.

Serried ridges of snow straggled across the surface of the lake, and whirling cones of it rose in the grip of the wind. The brigade wound slowly among the drifts. The sun was a rayless disk of frozen radiance behind a frosted mist that hung suspended between heaven and earth. The white wilderness was motionless, chill, forbidding in its frozen grandeur. The brigade was the only thing of motion in a land primarily without motion. It was somehow symbolic of the indomitable will and high endeavor of the man who had fought it tooth and nail for six biting years.

That day they spanned the lake's thirty-seven miles and made camp in the windy timber. Campfires roared to life. A hundred hungry dogs yelped and heaved as food was thrown to them. Tents sprang up, and the sleds were shifted four abreast. Hungry men ate steaming food out of tin dishes and drank mugs of tea piping-hot. Voices broke into gay trail-songs, pipes were lit. The wind boomed and clapped through the trees, the fires roared and shadows danced among the trees.

KING stood outside his tent with Doc Morrow, made a gesture with his pipe and said, "Feed a man and pay him well and he's happy. With money a man can be king! And suddenly—too—he can be a dead man."

"Pessimist!" muttered Doc Morrow.

"My eye!" growled King. "Look at history. The less known a man is, the smaller he is in this world, the greater chance he has of living to a ripe old age. Who wants his life—who wants the things he has since he has nothing?"

"I think I'd better give you a liver pill, Brad."

King laughed throatily and slapped Morrow on his back. "Doc, you're a brick. A good companion."

"How about a friend, Brad?"

King's face clouded. "If we don't make too close a friend of a man, we're not hurt when he lets us down."

"Still thinking of Buddy Simmonds?"

Muscles bulged alongside King's strong jaws. His teeth grated against his pipe. He gritted, "Poor young fool! I might have made him a Yukon king but for that—

Bah That soulless cat! Damn her!"

He spun and plunged into his tent. Morrow stood beneath the stars, eyes glazed with thought.

"God," he whispered in a hushed voice, "don't let bitterness ruin this man!"

The singing petered out. The blaze of fires dwindled in reglowing coals. The dogs huddled in the snow. One by one the men crawled into their tents. The Northern Lights hissed across the wide parade of stars.

King and Morrow lay in the tent which they shared. Morrow snored stentorously, but this was drowned in great measure by the noise of the wind tussling with the tent. King slept silently, moccasins off, shirt open, but otherwise dressed, after the custom of a seasoned trailsman.

Midnight passed. And it was a little after midnight that a shout echoed in the encampment. This was followed by several cries, terrified, prolonged.

King sat up straight. As he sat up the flap of his tent was thrust aside and Slim Drone yelled:

"My God, Brad!"

"What?"

"Fire! Fire!"

King sprang out of the tent. He saw oily flames leaping up from one corner of his sleds, saw men running around and shouting, heard the startled yelps of dogs.

He bit off, "Blankets! Blankets over the flames. Quick!"

With that he swung around, plunged into the tent, collided with Doc Morrow, who was rising.

"Brad, what—"

"Fire! Off that blanket, Doc!"

He yanked the blanket and Doc Morrow fell down again. He dragged it out of the tent, ran with it toward the flames. Other men were running with blankets. The dogs were leaping and yelping, and the dark smoke billowed.

The oily flames were being whipped across the sleds by the wind, snapping at the canvas sled-wrappers. King plunged toward the nearest, flung his blanket over the flames, yelled for another man to grab the other end and smother the flames. A man jumped to his command. They bore down on either end of the blanket. The flames licked out at the edges, the smoke whirled about their heads.

"Quick!" yelled King. "Draw the sleds apart!"

He caught hold of a charred handle-bar and heaved as he shouted. Drone grabbed the same handle-bar. They toiled with it, moved the sled, dragged it away from the others. As they did so, the wind tore off the blanket, and the flames shot up again. A tongue of fire snapped at Drone's head and drove him tumbling to the snow. He banged against King and King went down with him. An Indian came ploughing through the smoke and fell over them. The dogs were raising pandemonium.

King disentangled himself from the Indian's legs, heaved to his feet, grabbed for the blanket again. Drone was up, too, and Drone grabbed the other end. They plastered it down over the flames, and spouts of smoke shot from the edges and drove against them. Drone cursed mightily, then choked and had to shut up.

Other blankets were being thrown over another sled while other hands hauled that sled from the main brigade. Men shouted at one another through the smoke, collided with one another. But they all toiled to spread the sleds apart, to save the food that was destined for New Hope. The wind was their enemy. It fed the flames with life, drove the flames against the men, whipped the smoke about in suffocating clouds.

KING flung out the blanket that had smothered the flames on his sled. The sled-wrapper was smouldering. He ripped that off, hurled it to the snow, picked up a branch and beat out the sparks that lingered on the dunnage. Then he jumped across to help at another sled. He was a cyclone of action, cursing clumsy hands and clumsy efforts. He drove his men to greater effort, fought the flames to a standstill, tossed a burning case from the sled, and not satisfied with that, shouted to his men to heave the sled over.

Presently there were no more flames. The wind ran off with the smoke. Three or four wooden boxes lay smouldering in the snow, and King rolled them over and over until the last spark was dead. Then he stood up, breathless, perspiring, and looked around at his tangled outfit. His face was smeared with soot, his breathing rasped in his throat.

The men stood around in groups, breathing heavily, too, smeared with soot also. The dogs quieted down. Doc Morrow moved in the light of one of the campfires and wagged his head, mopped his face.

"This—this was almost tragedy," he panted.

Came King's crisp voice, "How the hell did this start?"

Drone said, "I just woke up. I saw the flames."

King's knotted fist thumped slowly against his thigh. "Someone threw oil over these sleds and put a match to them. This was no accident. Who did it?"

The men were silent in the wind. Finally Drone moved to one of the sleds, drew off the wrapper, bent down. When he stood up he said:

"Our oil ain't been touched."

King's fist was still thumping ominously against his thigh.

"You saw no one around the camp?"

Drone said, "Nope—not me. I was sleeping."

For a long moment King remained silent. His fist slowed down and hung motionless at his side.

"Then someone sneaked up here," he said. "Some louse sneaked up, spread his oil, and touched it off. So that"—he almost snarled—" my brigade would not get to New Hope. Very well. From now on there'll be a guard set every night. You men will march with your rifles—and if we're attacked—you'll fight. This brigade will get to New Hope come hell or high water! I'll double your salary—but you've got to fight if necessary! You've got to!"

Drone said, "Jake, boss. I reckon we'll all fight to get this stuff through!"

"Good," said King.

Then he went about and saw what damage had been done. He found that they had gotten off lucky. Only one sled was burned beyond repair, and no more than seventy pounds of provisions lost. He told Drone to repack the sled they had turned over, and then strode into his tent. He lit the lantern, stuffed and lit his pipe. His eyes burned gray in their sockets, his wide mouth was a rigid line above his square, firm chin.

Doc Morrow came in, sighed and dropped his robes. "Gosh, Brad, that was a shock for a while!"

"For a while, eh? It still is!" Then his voice dropped, became almost a whisper, hoarse, throbbing with emotion. "I remember something—at Tagish. I remember that woman's hateful eyes, her snarling mouth, her threat—yes, her threat!"

"What threat, Brad?"

King doubled his fist and held it before him. He stared at the first. "That she would break me—crush me!"

Morrow frowned. "How could a woman?—"

"Crush me?" asked King, strangely gentle. He shook his head. "That woman could. Not by her lonesome. But—she could get others to crush me. She— Caig has always hated me ever since I founded my townsite. Once I beat him to a pulp. He had the crust to come over the river with a couple of his puppies and tell me I'd live longer if I'd make Jackman my headquarters and not build a town across from his. I told him to get out. He called me a claim-jumper and several other things. I sailed into him and his puppies carried him back across the river. That woman is in his pay now—and she can make a man—even a man like Caig do strange things. If it's Caig—I'll ruin him—wipe him off the face of the North. I'll—"

"Brad, son," said Morrow, reaching out a hand, "whatever you do, keep your head. Be careful of—power."

King said evenly, slowly, "Thank God I have power!"

V

THE grub brigade plugged down the Hootalinqua in the jaws of a young blizzard. Men and dogs and sleds were enveloped in booming clouds of snow hard as buckshot. King was in the lead, head bent into the wind. Directly behind him plodded Slim Drone. Back of them the long outfit was hidden by the blustering white shroud.

When King heard Drone's voice shout, "Hey, Brad—wait a minute!" he stopped and turned. The wind ballooned his parka. Drone was looking back, and when King went over beside him, Drone said, "Word came up the line to stop."

It was impossible in the white smother to see beyond the first sled. King slushed

back, and the driver of the first sled said, "Dunno why," and rubbed an icicle from his beard. His face was masked with frost.

A shape came heaving out of the snow. "Boss, there's a girl back there!" The wind snatched at the man's words.

"What?"

The man waved his hand. "Girl back there!"

Frowning, King tramped back along the brigade, the man beside him—back past snow-swathed, frost-bearded men standing by dogs that had icicles hanging from shaggy jaws. About half-way down the line he reached a small knot of men, and he saw Doc Morrow on one knee with a girl in his arm. He was forcing some kind of liquid between her lips.

"What happened?" asked King, bending down beside Morrow.

His eyes keened. It was the girl whose brother he had struck in the trading store at Tagish Lake. Her eyes were closed. She was moaning.

Morrow said, "She stumbled across the tail-end of the brigade. She's exhausted. I can't imagine what she's doing out in this blow. This will bring her around."

The men standing around were silent. The force of the wind swayed them like trees, hooted among them.

King remained kneeling beside Morrow, eyes fixed on the girl's colorless face.

When she opened her eyes she had Morrow's face to look at. It was a good face to see—gentle, kindly. For a long moment she stared blankly, then a cloud came into her eyes, pain raced across her face.

"Oh!" she cried.

"My dear," soothed Morrow.

She clung to him, and his broad shoulders shielded her from the slam of the wind.

"It was terrible!" she cried. "Oh, dear God!"

"Sh—sh," said Morrow. "What happened?"

She looked at him wide-eyed, lips fluttering. "Back there—he died! It was ghastly! We—we were moving through the blizzard across a lake. He was at the sled. I was behind him. Something happened to the ice. Dogs and sled and Dick went under all at once. Oh—I can still see it!" She clapped her mittened hands to her eyes.

MORROW held her closer, looked over her head, shook his own head, then looked up at King. King's face was without emotion. He stared at the girl. And as if that stare had the power to attract hers, she suddenly looked up and for the first time saw him. Her eyes dilated. She crouched closer in Morrow's arms, and a look of fear welled in her eyes. The snow beat against King's face, whisked across his eyes, but his eyes remained steady. Morrow looked at him.

"Brad—you've met?"

King nodded slowly. "Yes."

The girl said, "Yes," bitterly then added, "Fate hasn't been kind to throw me on your mercy."

King's mouth tightened. He stood up abruptly, struck his thigh with his fist, put his face against the hard push of the wind and the snow.

Morrow was patting the girl's shoulder. "The outfit . . . your brother . . . all went under?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "Nothing came up. I ran around, crazed, crying to God. I stayed by the break in the ice for three hours. I was helpless—so helpless. We had a thousand dollars—Dick had it on him. We hoped to make our fortune. We were such good pals—for years. Everything's lost—poor Dick is lost—poor—" She buried her face against Morrow's shoulder.

King said to the men who stood nearest him. "Shift the dunnage on that sled. Spread it among the others—most of it anyhow. Make a place on the sled for the lady to ride." He knelt down beside the girl. "I'm sorry for you—for this tragedy. The hospitality of my brigade is yours."

She turned a taut face toward him. "Thank you, Mr. King. I shan't impose on you any longer than I can help. As soon as I—"

He said, "If it were possible, I'd recover your brother's body, but these lakes are deep. It would be futile to try."

She said nothing. Her body grew limp, her head drooped, and she sobbed brokenly again.

King looked at Morrow. "When she is on the sled, send word up the line, Doc."

He stood up, flung a look at his men who were shifing the dunnage, and then plowed up through the blizzard to the head

of his outfit, passing the news briefly as he went.

Drone said, "Gosh, a gal in this outfit!"

"Yes, replied King. "On the list of those who despise me."

ALL that day the outfit toiled beneath the brutal lash of the storm. That night they made camp in the lee of a cut-bank that did a lot toward breaking the force of the storm. King had a tent set up for the girl, furnished it with his best robes and blankets and installed a portable stove. When it was ready, he sought her out where she sat by one of the new campfires.

"Your tent is ready," he said. "I'll show you."

She rose. He indicated the way with his hand. At the door of the tent he said:

"The stove's started. One of the men will bring you more wood after supper. I'll have your supper sent in." He was simple, impersonal, even distant.

"Thank you," she said.

He nodded briefly, turned on his heel and slushed over to his own tent. He pushed in and found Morrow changing socks.

"Awful weather," remarked Morrow. "Sad about Miss Costigan. Poor girl. Ah, life's cruel sometimes. And the courage of the girl—to some into this country. She and her brother were alone in the world. Now she's broke. Think of it, Brad—broke in this country!"

"So her name's Costigan."

"What do you intend doing with her?"

King looked at him sharply. "Do? What can I do except leave her at the next town? She'll have to go back to the outside."

Morrow held a sock in his hand absently. "Broke, Brad—stony broke."

"You're not suggesting I give her money? You know damned well she wouldn't take it. Notice that chin?"

"Yes. But"—Morrow raised his blue eyes and pursed his lips—"but we can't leave her stranded. We've got to do something for her."

"What, for instance?"

Morrow's eyes were steady. "For instance—take her to New Hope."

"Guess again. She'd never do it—with the opinion she has of me. It would be the same as giving her money."

"No. Listen, Brad. You need someone to take care of your business details. She could do it."

King shook his head, slapped his knee. "No. That's out. She probably could—but I'll not have it that way. You forget, Doc, that she despises me. Knowing that, I couldn't have her around. But"—he leaned back and stretched his arms—"doctors have secretaries. Maybe she'll work for you. Ask her. I think you need some help, and another name on my payroll won't break me."

Morrow began to smile. "Brad, you have a roundabout way of helping people."

"I'm not helping anybody. You started it. You see what you can do about it. My hands are out of it—off it. And if you want to have any luck at all, don't tell her that she'll be actually on *my* pay-roll. On yours . . . Let's eat."

VI

JOE ANGELO crouched in the bushes and peered with killer's eyes at the campfires of King's brigade. It was midnight. The snow had stopped falling, the wind had fallen off. Now there was that motionless cold that bites into a man's very marrow.

Joe Angelo's face was hidden in the shadow of his parka hood. He muttered to himself—cursed. He saw three men sitting by a fire. All of them had rifles and from time to time one or another of the men got up, walked around, listened, stared into the darkness. Joe Angelo backed up carefully.

Presently he turned and crept cautiously away. When he could see the fires no longer over his shoulder he rose and put on broad snowshoes and sloped rapidly through the trees. When he had gone a mile he saw another red glow in the darkness, and soon he came upon three tents and three sleds. An Indian was fueling the fire. Another was sleeping rolled in a blanket.

Angelo passed them without a word and went to one of the tents. He pushed aside the flap and looked in. Queenie Carrera and Sard Caig and Bertie Browne were sitting around a lantern, drinking. He kicked off his snowshoes and crawled into the tent, sat down and shrugged.

"Dat bum King he's gotta da guards watchin'."

Caig said, "I thought as much."

"Now wot s'y—" began Bertie.

But Queenie broke in with—"Oh, what you say! All the time you say a lot that is nothing. Pah! If you did not bungle up the job last night—"

"S'y!" piped Bertie. "S'y, where the 'ell do you get that stuff? I sneaked up, didn't I? And I spilled the oil, didn't I? And I touched it off. Now, I arsk you, wot else could I done?"

Joe Angelo said, "Dis is what I say, me. Whatsa use dis foolin' around? Say, I can killa dat bum King. Hey, Sard, you say da word and I kill him."

Caig put a withering look on Joe Angelo. "Wop, you're sittin' on your brains, so help me!"

"I am not so sure about that!" snapped Queenie. "Joe has the right idea."

"Has he?" mocked Caig. "No. Don't you realize that he has two dozen men in his outfit, that they're all armed? You leave the brain work to me—all of you.

"Listen: We've shot our bolt and lost. We'll wait till we get to Jackman."

"Pah!" snapped Queenie mutinously.

"In Jackman," went on Caig, "I can get all the men I want. You got me steamed up on this, Queenie, but you're not going to wreck the whole shebang. You listen to me. I'm ripe to drive King off the river. He's getting too big—getting too much power. For you, Queenie, I'll break him—but you let me do it in my own way. And as for you, Joe—another crack about killing him offhand and I'll bust you."

Bertie nodded. "Sard 'as the right idea. Wot's the use o' goin' off arf-cocked? Hit don't get no one nowhere."

"The more I think of that Brad King," repeated Queenie, "the more I hate him! Me, with my own hands I could kill him!"

Joe Angelo said, "Queenie, you would not have to do dat when Joe Angelo is around."

"This I think, Joe," she replied, "that you have the guts much more than—"

"You cut that out!" barked Caig. He grabbed her wrist, shook it. "You hear me—cut it out! And, Joe, you—you hold your lip. Blockheads! Both of you!" He flung away her wrist.

Queenie crouched back, cat-like, two wicked creases appearing between her eyes. Caig's eyes on her seemed to prevent her uttering words that writhed behind bitter lips. His hard voice went on:

"If you're going to start trouble in my camp, you dope, you'll get pitched out on your neck. Don't get swelled up on the idea that I'm sap enough to let *you* run anything. And I'm not sap enough to play a song-and-dance to your tune. I'm not—other guys, Queenie. I'm not—a kid. I'm a tough baby. Get that. And by God, don't go getting theatrical around me. I don't eat well on that, kid. Lay off!"

His hard blunt eyes stabbed her for a long moment after he had finished; then the eyes jumped to Angelo, and Angelo's eyes were dark and scintillating like dark liquid fire. But presently he smiled, and his big lips snaked back over large white teeth. He shrugged, put his elbows against his sides and spread his hands palmwise, bowed his dark shaggy head.

"Sard, sure, you da boss."

Caig cracked fist to palm. "Then remember that" his voice banged. "Brains? You never had any! All you think of is kill—kill! I'll tell you when to *kill*. That's why you're on my payroll. If I thought King could be got out of the way with ease, I'd say—yes, kill him. But not now. Now pipe down about that. Get me?"

JOE ANGELO was hunched forward, big head down between thick shoulders. Shaggy black eyebrows twitched over dark dagger-pointed eyes, wide nostrils palpitated, there was the faint sound of teeth crunching. Joe Angelo's mouth burst open.

"All da time you say I gotta no brain!" he snarled. "You lay offa me, hear! You lay offa me! You no so big cheese you'-self, I tell you dat, big boy! Me, Joe Angelo, I take da insult from no guy, you neither, dat is so. Now you tak-a da tip and don't go push-a me too mooch. Me, I'm Joe Angelo, and sometimes I have kill a man dat insult me too mooch, betcha. Dat's all—you lay offa me!"

For a long moment Caig was silent. His eyes, that seemed to have taken on a hard greenish light, bored unwaveringly into Joe Angelo's. And presently Joe Angelo's dark eyes wavered, his teeth gnawed at his lower lip, bit by bit his head went down.

When his chin stopped again his barrel chest, and remained there, Caig leveled an arm toward the entrance.

"Joe, get out. Go to your tent." His voice was low, steady, blunt. Then, "Bertie, you go with him."

Bertie Browne chirruped. "At's wot I s'y, Sard. Let's all turn in. Wot's the blinkin' use o' gettin' the wind up? Come on, Joe, let's pound the bloomin' ear."

Without a word, without a look at anyone, Joe Angelo turned and crept out of the tent. Bertie bobbed after him. Minutes later Caig poured himself a drink, threw it down neat, licked his lips slowly and then drew them firmly together. He planted his eyes on Queenie.

"Kid, get this. That Wop is nuts over you, but you leave him alone. Cut out getting him all steamed up. There's two guys in this country that you can't buffalo. One of them is my enemy, Brad King. The other is—myself. The sooner you get wise to yourself, the better. Okey. Hop to your tent. I'm going to hit the hay."

Queenie was smiling at him, her dark eyes veiled seductively. Presently she put back her head, chuckled softly, liquidly, then blew a kiss to Caig and crawled out.

Caig looked at his empty glass. "Damn—her—power!"

VII

IT was a little past noon in New Hope. On the slope behind the town puffs of smoke were rising, and there was the sound of machinery. A new shaft was being sunk.

Main Street faced the river. Men were busy. New buildings were rising in the street. Hammers banged, saws buzzed; there was a team of horses drawing newly felled trees down the street to the sawmill. The town looked new. It was new—a neat town, with three streets leading into the main one that paralleled the frozen river.

It was quiet in the newly opened King's Palace Bar. It was a bar primarily for men—large, thick-walled, with broad tables and a lot of comfortable arm-chairs. Around one of the tables sat half a dozen men. One was Todd Hutch, manager of the establishment—tall, bony, clean-shaven, in black suit, black tie, black hat raked over one ear. Jess Miller, the gambler, pale-faced and gentle-voiced. Two sourdoughs in from the trail. Mike Kane, the bouncer. Hen Hildebrand, Dawson saloonman, millionaire—one of the best known and best liked men in the gold country.

He was saying, "Take it from me, boys, Pop Hunker's probably right. The Indians are coming out of the woods, muttering about famine, praying to Keetchec Manitou. Me and my outfit, we were camped over on the Pelly, and a gang of wolves—I'll swear there was forty in the pack—come up and kept circling around our camp all night. Bad sign, that.

"You know me—I ain't superstitious, but I believe in reading signs. And I been hearing the call of wolves every night, and five years ago, when we had the famine, I used to hear the same kind of call. Kind of makes me shiver to think of it. You see a bald hill and then you see up there a wolf sticking his nose at the moon and calling to his heathen gods. And by and by you see more come up and stand there, too, and they're all raising hell in the moonlight. And the Injuns—the Injuns know. They got ways and means of smelling trouble, which we whites don't sabe much. Yes, sirree!"

"Brad took Pop's advice," said Tod Hutch. "The first time I ever seen Brad take any advice."

Jess Miller, the gambler, said, "A remarkable man. At thirty, one of the richest in the country—as rich as you, Hen. But a queer bird, too—lonesome, hard-working, cold-blooded."

"Ah," said Tod Hutch, "not as cold-blooded as he looks. But he's got to be that way—in this country. A chum with his money—well, he's got to keep his eyes open. He—"

Hutch paused, leaned back, twisted his head and looked through the window. All of them had heard a number of cheers. Then the door banged open and a man yelled:

"Hey, here comes Brad's brigade!"

Hutch jumped up with an exclamation and a broad, bright-eyed grin. The two old sourdoughs jumped up. Jess Miller rose with dignity. Hen Hildebrand gulped down his drink, smacked his lips, and

joined the others on the way to the door.

When they got outside they saw men coming on the run from all directions, shouting and waving hats. Then the carpenters on the housetops began beating with their hammers, and from the hillside steam-whistles began to blow. A chant started among a group of men marching down the street, and others took it up.

King! King! King!
King of the Yukon Trail!
Bing! Bing! Bing!
Hail to the King! *Hail!*

DARKNESS bells tinkled. Shaggy heads of dogs swung low. Steel runners ground over the hard-packed snow. The long brigade came swinging down the street, bearded, trail-weary drivers joining in the thunderous chant, flinging up a fist at the end of each rousing line. A hundred hammers beat upon the rooftops. From the hillsides the steam whistles shrilled on the frosty air. The men of the town fell in beside the moving brigade, more voices joined in song, the whole frontier town rose up in its deep-throated lusty acclaim.

Hen Hildebrand said to Tod Hutch, "I been fifteen years in this country, Tod, and I never got a hand like that—and I never seen another man get one like it. Look at him, Tod!"

Brad King tramped at the head of his outfit, parka hook thrown back, dark stubble on his face, frosty-white around the mouth and nostrils. Tall and erect he was, lips tight but slightly smiling, deep in his eyes a moving, poignant fire. A striking figure of a man, with a stiff front against the world. No one knew how the blood pounded in his veins, up at his temples. No one knew how fast his heart was beating as that wild, rhythmic chant throbbed against his ears. Another man would have jumped and sung too, beamed all over his face. But not King. He took it all as if he were to the manner born—tramped down that roaring frontier street in the grip of a numb joyousness that held him spellbound.

Finally he turned, walked backward, held up his hands. Slim Drone yelled the word to stop down the line, and one by one the teams drew up, the entire outfit came to a standstill. Tod Hutch loped out to grip King's hand. He barked happily:

"Great work, Brad!"

"Hello, Tod. Hello there, Jess . . . Well, Hen Hildebrand!"

"Boy," said Hildebrand with a hard grip, "all you need is a crown and throne—and a Queen."

"Still the kidder, eh, Hen?"

The crowd milled around, hemmed in King, shouting and waving hands and hats. He raised his hands above his head.

"Hold on! Wait a minute! Easy, boys!"

He had to repeat this over and over again before the crowd tamed down. Then he stood on the top of the first sled, hands in pockets.

"Don't worry, boys, this is not going to be a speech," he said loudly. "We had the devil's own time getting here, but we got here. Thanks to the hard work of my men under Slim Drone—and to the services of Doc Morrow—and to my pups. The famine's creeping in. We saw signs of it all the way. But the grub brigade is in. Thanks for the big hand, boys—thanks a thousand times!"

A voice boomed richly from the crowd, "Praised be the Lord that He guided Brad safely home!" Pop Hunker's great mop of white hair blew in the breeze. His hands were upraised, his eyes luminous.

Then the crowd broke into heavy cheering. King jumped down from the sled, gave Slim Drone brief instructions, and elbowed his way through the milling men. He swung into his office, above which were his living quarters.

He drew off his mittens, yanked his parka over his head, took off his cap. His hair was twisted all over his head, his trail beard was matted; he looked unkempt and weary. He dropped into a swivel chair before a roll top desk, sighed, closed his eyes for a long moment. And while his eyes were closed, a frown appeared on his forehead. Then he opened them, growled to himself, took out a bunch of keys, opened a drawer in the desk, lifted up a bottle and poured himself a drink.

The front door opened and Doc Morrow ushered in Lola Costigan.

KING, deep in thought, blank eyes on the blank surface of the desk, did not seem to hear. The man and girl stood

inside the door, regarding the back of King's shaggy head. They looked at each other. Then Morrow looked back at the back of King and cleared his throat.

King started slightly, swiveled his chair around, sat looking at them. He raised his hand, brought the palm down slowly against the arm of the chair.

"Well, we got here, didn't we?" he said.

"Thank God!" said Morrow.

King struck the arm of the chair again, and at the same time stood up. "Well, Doc—about Miss Costigan. There's a little new cabin down the street that ought to suit her nicely—across the way from yours. Your Indian boy can bring her wood and do chores for her, I guess. You arrange about that yourself. Go over all my dogs, and see how that Indian's cold is. He was hacking badly last night. And see if you can't do something about Axel Jonson's pains in the stomach. That's about all for the present, I guess, Doc. I hope, Miss Costigan, you'll be comfortable in the cabin. You'll find the doctor a good boss."

"Thank you," she said gravely.

King turned back to his desk, opened the roll top and sat down. Morrow and the girl went out. King turned to look at the closed door. His lips flattened. He struck the desk shortly. He glared at the fist on the desk.

"I'm a fool!" he muttered. "But there's something about that girl—after these days on the trail with her—that gets me." He relaxed all at once, then caught himself. A frown ridged his forehead. His palm thunked again on the desk top, "But by heaven," he whispered aloud, "she's beautiful."

OUT in the street Pop Hunker was speaking to a crowd of men:

"It's comin'. It's a-crawlin' over the hills and tundra flats. It's layin' its curse upon the land. It's death walkin' in the cold, an' hungry. It's famine!

"Hundreds 'll die, for plague follers. I know, I do. Towns will be wiped out. There'll be murder. So stick to New Hope. Brad King was the only man as took my advice, and he's got a doctor on his payroll—and look, look at all that there grub bein' toted into the storehouse! Stand by him. Fight for him. His name is a-goin' to be a legend in the Yukon. I ain't no preacher an' I ain't got no extraordinary powers for seein' in the future. I just been readin' sign, and I loves hoomanity."

One of the men shouted, "Look!" and pointed to a bald hill beyond the town.

Pop Hunker raised his hand. "Yes, look! See them? See the lean-bellied beggars whoopin' over the hill! Count 'em. Shucks, you can't count 'em, they's too many! But tonight you'll hear 'em yellin' to the moon!"

VIII

KING settled down to the business of running his frontier town. Massey, his mining boss, reported a new streak in the hillside. Each day that passed found King wealthier, but he did not relax. He went into the mines himself. He inspected the buildings that Woodman and a hundred men were constructing. He listened to men who came to him with troubles, petty squabbles, with sickness.

He settled the squabbles with the dignity of a magistrate. He sent the sick men to the log hospital he had erected. He remembered their names and always dropped in, every day, to see them. He was offhand about this, his tongue was not honeyed, but they appreciated and looked forward to his visits. In his hands he held the many strings of his town.

Word came over the river that Sard Caig was back in Jackman, that banners and lanterns had welcomed him and the belle of all the trails, Spanish Queenie Carrera. Rum ran freely there, and a band played all of the first night and into the next morning.

There was a shooting, but both men had been too drunk to shoot straight and only a couple of lights had been knocked out. Around the town the frozen-boned North sprawled its white silence, and at night the wolves pierced the darkness with strange calls; but Jackman heard only the tumult of its own dance-hall.

Lola Costigan proved more than a secretary to Doc Morrow. The rough men of New Hope came to worship her. She had a soothing way with those who were ill. Her hands were cool soft hands on fevered foreheads.

King saw little of her. Days passed when their trails never crossed, for he

timed his visits to the sick when he knew she would not be there. Day on day he was drawing farther into himself, becoming more silent, more like a feudal lord. Men said it was caused by the closing in of the famine.

Weeks passed. Then there was a night when terror struck Jackman. An unheard of thing happened. A great pack of wolves came storming across the tundra and swooped into town, screaming the hunt call. Men scattered. Shots barked in the darkness. Then men ganged together with rifles, climbed to the roofs of the cabins, and the darkness was speared with flaming muzzles. The wolves retreated, leaving twenty of their dead in the main street.

Afterward Sard Caig stood in his sumptuous living-room above the Jackman Saloon. His blue-jawed face was set in hard lines, his hands were knotted behind his back.

Queenie lounged on a divan, smoking a cigarette elegantly through a long ivory holder.

"Now," she said, "it has happened. Now watch this town of your own turn against itself.

"The famine is here. The wolves have been so bold to come into the street. The Indians they are praying. All the men here they have been suddenly hit with the terror. And how much provision has this town?" She snapped her fingers. "Enough to feed only one-tenth of the men for another month! And look—look at New Hope, and the great Brad King, and his well-stocked storehouse, and his doctor, and his hospital. He is—what you call it?—invulnerable against the great scourge, is that not so?"

That green hard look came in Caig's eyes. But he said nothing.

Queenie jumped up, tossed her pretty head. "You would wait, eh? You did not want to try again on the Yukon trail to stop him. Ah, you would wait! Now—now what have you? And then you have the opinion of yourself that you are great. Ha! This is the extent of your greatness!"

He said throatily, "I have enough grub hidden away for you and me and a few of us."

"Have you? And do you think that the horde in this town does not suspect that? And will they not try to get it if you hold out?

"This I think, Sard Caig—that for the long time you have been kidding people to believing that you have the iron nerve and the courage. Have you? Pah!"

He barked, "Shut up!" and took three quick steps that brought him in front of her. His hand clamped on her arm. He shook her brutally, and his lower teeth showed. Her body straightened and she met his own hard green stare with a look of wild contempt and challenge.

"That—is—what—I—said, Sard Caig!"

He snarled, "This is what I say, kid—that you can't forget King high-hatted you, that you hate him, want his blood! What the hell are you beefing about? I wanted to wait—yes, and I have waited. I'm no dumb-bell, baby. The time will be ripe very soon. This gang of mine, they know New Hope is well-stocked. When the famine begins to pinch they'll come to me, and a word dropped wisely about King and his grub will plant the seed! Get me? Can you get that through the dumb lovely nut of yours?"

She dropped her eyes, exhaled a long-held breath. Then she whimpered, "Please, Sard, you hurt me."

He let her go but continued to stare at her. She looked up archly at him. She smiled. She reached up and kissed him.

"Sard, maybe I was very wrong."

He took her chin in his hand, grinned crookedly. "Baby, you're all right with me as long as you don't go off the handle. But—don't try to ride me. Sit down and cool off. That's a good kid."

THE scourge of the famine began to make itself felt. Packs of wolves came out of the frozen valleys, flanks sagging, calls sweeping down the night wind into Jackman and New Hope. Lone trappers staggered in from hard trails, grub packs empty, swearing that every bit of game had left the land. Others told of finding bones of men on the trail. Travel between towns was suspended, for the wolves were desperate, lustful. Old-timers said they had never seen so many wolves on the war-path before.

A week after the wolves had terrorized Jackman, Brad King was sitting in his office, feet on the desk, smoking a cigar. He

saw the forms of some men appear outside his door, and a knock followed.

Without moving, he said, "Come in."

The door opened. Sard Caig trooped in. Behind him were Joe Angelo and Bertie Browne. Browne closed the door. Caig nodded briefly, strode sure-footed to the center of the floor, jammed his hands into his pockets and eyed King for a long moment in silence.

Finally: "Hello, King."

King said: "Hello, Caig."

Joe Angelo and Bertie Browne stood a little to the rear of Caig and on either side. They said nothing. Bertie Browne was a picture of innocence. Joe Angelo was dark, broody, malevolent. King paid no attention to either of them.

"Well, Caig?"

Caig rocked on the balls of his feet. "This famine. You know what shape Jackman is in. If you don't, I'll tell you."

"I don't care to know," said King.

"I'll tell you anyhow. There's a couple of hundred men over there, and the spell of this thing has got them. When men want food or women, they'll go a hell of a long way to get either. They know how well you're fixed. A committee came to me and talked turkey. I told them to calm down. Now I'm here to tell you what those men want, and it's up to you—"

"Up to me," broke in King, "to divvy."

Caig nodded solemnly. "Just that."

Bertie Browne looked more innocent than ever, and Joe Angelo looked more darkly malevolent.

King picked up a pencil and tapped with it idly on the desk. He said, "Caig, you go back and tell those men that I've got grub enough for my own town, for my own men—and no more. They laughed and jeered when I lit out for Dyea with my brigade. They soused themselves and called me a jack. They did the same when I came back. I've gone to a lot of expense, a lot of trouble, to get that grub here. And here it stays—for my own men—for the men who work for me—for the men I promised on oath to take care of should the famine strike. That is what yon can tell them, Caig."

"King," said Caig, "this is dangerous. Get that. Those men are straining at a leash. You've got to divvy—absolutely!"

Joe Angelo shook his fist and mumbled at King, "Yeah, dat's what you gotta do!"

King paid no attention to Joe Angelo. He kept looking at Caig. His face was emotionless, cold. He lounged in his chair at ease.

He said, "You've heard me, Caig. That grub stays here. Not a solitary ounce of it moves out of New Hope. Tell the men in your town that they still have the opportunity of going south. Cassiar Bar will not be so hard hit."

"You know well enough the wolves, hundreds of 'em, are on the meat trail."

"The men have guns. They can travel in a bunch."

"But"—Caig opened and closed his hands—"they won't do that, not when there's grub so near! And wolves hard-pressed don't give a hoot about a gun!"

King raised a hand. "I don't care what they do. I don't care what you tell 'em. But they're not going to horn in on my town. That's final, Caig. The door's behind you."

Joe Angelo jumped in front of Caig, spread his legs far apart, lowered his head, bared wolfish teeth, shook his fist at King.

"You gotta divvy, fella! You gotta! Dat's wot I say—"

Caig grabbed hold of Joe Angelo's shoulder and jerked him back, stepped in front of him, laid hard green eyes on King.

"King, this is no small thing. It's tragedy—or it will be tragedy. You've got to listen to reason."

King shook his head. "I've told you, Caig. And another thing. My brigade was attacked on the trail. Maybe you know that. Maybe you know that some dirty son tried to fire it, and that we had one whale of a time putting the fire out. You and your outfit were somewhere behind me, Caig—you and Queenie Carrera and some others." He thinned his voice to a razor edge. "I know you hate me. The two of you put together might have found enough reason to fire my brigade!"

"By God!" exploded Caig, tensing.

King was on his feet. His voice began to throb—"Tried to fire it so that my brigade wouldn't get here, so that the men of my town would break down, break up, drift and leave me flat! And you failed! And now you come crawling over here with a big sob story! And behind it—yes, be-

hind it, Caig—is your old desire to crush me, to level me off—and behind you is that woman! I'm no sap, Caig.

"Now clear out—you and your gunmen—and tell the mangy crowd in Jackman what I've told you! I'm bigger than you, Caig—bigger in every way. I'm a better man than you are. You can't crack me. So—get out! Beat it!"

Caig's voice came low, muffled, bitter. "All right, King. When this is over, there'll be one boss on this river."

"The same boss," said King, "that's here now." And he tapped his chest.

JOE ANGELO'S eyes blazed. Muscles jerked across his face. He cannoned past Caig, toward King, a knife flashing in his hand. King moved one foot, shifted one shoulder. His right hand caught Joe Angelo's knife hand in mid-career. His body heaved without his feet budging. Joe Angelo somehow left the floor, hurtled over King's shoulder. King turned, still holding the wrist. Joe Angelo landed on his back, and as he landed King gave the arm a vicious twist and the knife clattered to the floor.

Bertie Browne's gun was half-drawn. Caig, biting an oath, closed hard fingers around Bertie's wrist, held the hand motionless, while he looked at Joe Angelo lying on the floor.

King picked up the knife by the handle, tossed it in the air, caught it by the handle again, looked at Caig.

"You better take this bad boy home, Caig," he said, and with a short chuckle caught the knife by the point, snapped it downward. The point stuck in the floor, the hilt quivered.

Joe Angelo was breathing thickly on the floor.

King said, "Get up, wop."

Joe Angelo got up, rubbing his palms along his thighs. King nodded toward the door. Caig and Bertie Browne moved toward it, and Joe Angelo sloped after them. Caig stepped aside for his two men to go out first. He stared greenly at King.

King yanked the knife from the floor, hefted it, threw it deftly. The blade sank in the door frame six inches from Caig's shoulder.

King said, "Give the bad boy his knife."

Caig growled, wrenched the knife from the door frame, slipped it into his pocket, backed out and pulled shut the door with a bang.

IX

LOLA sat in the sitting-room of her little cabin. Her elbow was on the window sill. Her chin was in her hand. She had known King for a little more than two months, and in all that time she could count the times they had spoken on the fingers of one hand. Slowly, certainly, inevitably, she had become aware of the power of the man over other men, the cool calm of him, his dignity toward her. Of a nature essentially soft, she had pride also, and between her pride and King's there was a barrier.

She saw the door of the little hospital across the street open and Doc Morrow come out. He came toward her cabin, and then she heard his knock on the door. She rose and went over and opened it. He entered smiling, cheerful, took her hand in one of his and patted it with the other. He looked over her shoulder at the table set for two.

"Ah," he said, "so good of you to let me share the board!"

She smiled. "I'm glad you like my cooking, Doctor."

"U-m-m!" His old eyes sparkled.

When they were seated and eating Morrow, buttering a piece of bread, said offhand, "Brad likes good food, too."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yes."

She shrugged. "I invited him once. He refused."

Morrow frowned, not unpleasantly. "He was busy."

"Ah, yes!" softly.

Morrow looked levelly but kindly at her. "I think the young fool has fallen in love with you."

"Oh—nonsense! Oh—!" She sat back and laughed, but she also blushed.

"Truth," said Morrow, nodding. "He looks like a man in love. Everybody thinks it's business worry, but Brad has too sound a grip on his business to worry about it. Tell me, Lola, honestly, as one honest woman to an interested and meddling old man, what do you think of him?"

"What do you mean—think?"

"I mean—I mean, has your opinion changed of him?"

She put down her fork, sat back, wiped her lips with a napkin. She looked sidewise at a frosted window without speaking. Then: "I believe I have. In Dyea and along the trail to Tagish I heard his name a lot. I heard it linked with gold, with power, with an iron-fist that would brook no opposition. I heard him called a despot, a feudal lord, a high-handed king of the North. All those things, over and over again. There was much talk about his big food brigade, about the way he traveled like the king he was. His name was on every tongue, and many of the tongues were bitter.

"Since I've been here I've been able to see things differently. I've heard men talk about him in fine words. I've seen the things he's done, the way he's worked. I think his bringing food here was a great and noble thing. It showed vision. He's tireless, and his power is great—but I don't think he's a despot. There's something strange about his stand-offishness, his silences—and he rarely relaxes."

Morrow emitted a pleased sigh. "You have intelligence, Lola. And, let me tell you, the man thinks of you—tenderly!"

"No. He hasn't. That's your imagination, Doctor. He's consumed by his work. He never thinks of me—but then, of course"—with a nonchalant shrug—"I never think of him."

"Really, Lola?"

"Doctor, don't be silly! Of course not!"

"Yet—"

A knock sounded on the door. Morrod started to rise, but Lola beat him to it, and opened the door. A man stood there, looked in, saw Morrow.

"Doc," he said, "Brad's holdin' a meetin' in the saloon at one. Said you should be there. Caig and some guys came over this morning. Something's wrong."

The door closed. Lola turned and looked gravely at Morrow. Morrow looked at her, his old face a little grim.

"It's come, Lola," he said. "A serpent is stirring. God save us!"

She ran breathless to the table. "Doctor!"

His hand dropped over hers where it lay on the table. "My dear, Caig's mission was not a friendly one, I'll wager. The curse of the famine has been upon Jackman. Jackman will spread it here."

"But—but we have food!"

His hand rose from hers, became a fist, and the fist thumped the table. "We have, Lola! But Jackman hasn't!"

A SEA of men crammed the street in front of the saloon, restless, impatient, eager-eyed. All work was temporarily suspended. The cold was a windless cold. The sky above was a frozen dome, sunless, mute as death.

The saloon door opened and King came out, jumped upon a large packing case, slid his hands into his mackinaw pockets and ran his eyes over the sea of upturned faces. Bit by bit the low murmur of the crowd subsided, until there was absolute silence, complete and undivided attention.

"Men," said King in a loud clear voice, "I want a few words with you. You know that I've done everything within my power to thwart this famine, to save all of us, against starvation and the plague that follows—"

"Hooray!" thundered the lusty throats.

King took one hand from his pocket, held it up, and when the tumult died, returned the hand to his pocket. He went on:

"Now, men—now others are trying to cut in. This morning Sard Caig paid me a visit. You all know how Caig and I stand. We've always been enemies. And you know, too, that for months I've minded my own business. I had other and more important things to do than brawl with Sard Caig.

"Well, he came to me and told me that Jackman and its men are looking on our town—and men, it *is* our town, yours as well as mine—looking on our town with hunger in their eyes.

"He demanded that I split our grub with him. I refused to. We haven't enough. Caig and I had words. There was trouble—not much. Then he went away."

A voice thundered, "Down with Caig!"

King shouted, "No! No! No!" He raised his fists above his head. He had the power to silence his men. He said, "*Not* down with Caig. We are on the defensive, and we have property rights. The food is our property, this town is our property. We have every right in the world

to protect town and grub and our lives from pillage! I have been warned by Caig that the men of Jackman, his men—gamblers, riffraff, rumhounds, the scum of the trails—will strike!"

At the outer rim of the sea of faces he saw one white, tense face—Lola Costigan's. For a brief moment he regarded her, and a muscle in his neck twitched.

"We have these things of ours to defend. Up to this time I have paid you men for every move you've made. This is different—it is deeper, it is the law of self-preservation and the law of property rights. We must be all for one and one for all against destruction.

"I'll choose leaders. Work will stop. A heavy guard will be thrown around our storehouse. Our shorefront will be protected by armed men. Our town will be protected. I'll lead you. Now, men—are you with me?—are you with me?" His voice boomed up and down the street.

A hat was tossed into the air. Voices exploded here and there, and others joined them, and then the old chant started and all the voices took it up:

King! King! King!
King of the Yukon Trail!
Bing! Bing! Bing!
Hail to the King! *Hail!*

The wild acclaim thundered in King's ears. His blood leaped through his veins. Unconsciously his foot began thumping the tempo of the chant. And his gaze sweeping back and forth across the crowd, saw Lola's lips moving, her head swinging to it.

His own lips tightened. A muscle throbbed in his neck. He started to jump from the box, but caught himself, knotted his fists, drove emotion back down into his being, throttled it, but it twisted and strained around his heart. Pain though it was, it was somehow a strangely delicious pain.

X

A DOZEN men leaned against the walls in a cabin in Jackman. They were big men, rough men, bitter men. All but one. That one was Bertie Browne. He sat at the table, his small blue eyes, twinkling, a smile on his lips.

"Fellers, don't go gettin' uneasy. 'Old yer 'osses, as it were. The Queen will be 'ere any minute. And, blokes, the time is ripe. Across 'at bloomin' river is New 'Ope, and in New 'Ope is grub at 'll syve us. And there ain't only grub." He leaned forward, tapped gently on the table with a forefinger. His voice whispered sibilantly —"Wot else is in New 'Ope?

"Gold! Gold o' King's, nuggets of hit, stowed aw'y by 'im, gold 'e got outer 'is mines! Food we needs, me blokes—but there ain't no blinkin' reason why we shouldn't tyke gold along wit' hit. I arsk you, is 'ere?"

The men's eyes widened lustfully. Gold! Food—*and* gold!

The door banged open. Queenie Carrera came in with Joe Angelo. She swaggered across the floor, reached the table, stood with one hand against her hip. Her white teeth appeared slowly between curving lips.

"Well!" she said. "Señors, we meet here to discuss what you call the important business. Are you tired of waiting—and waiting? Ah, yes you are—I know that, yes I do! Well, then why is all this waiting? You are men, strong men, and all of you can fight. You were brought here because it is you that represents the other men, the stronger with the spirit of them."

"We're ready," clipped one.

"Good!" beamed Queenie. "Then wait no longer. The longer you wait the less food there will be in New Hope. Caig?" she chuckled. "What has this Sard Caig done? Like the fool he is he goes over and tries to talk the sense with this Brad King. Instead of striking as well he should have done. You will talk to all the men, and then you will tell Sard Caig that you are going to strike—tonight. And do not let him what you call buffalo you. Be men!"

One said, "Sard ain't a bad scout."

"Agreed," said Queenie tactfully. "But he is getting old, he has not the fire, the daring. The thing is, are you ready, and will you strike tonight?"

"We're ready," muttered the one who had first spoken, and the others nodded.

"Ah-h, that is men!" she drawled with her slowest, warmest smile. Then: "And attend to this. King is done in this country. Too long he has ruled. Too much he has insulted the poor defenseless woman

like me. Listen. The one of you that kills him . . . with that man will I take the trail —to anywhere!"

Eyes of men burned on her. She turned and sauntered to the door. "Well," she said, as she opened it, "tonight we strike, it is so?"

"Tonight!" roared every voice in the cabin.

SARD CAIG sat alone in his living-room—sat in the depths of a great leather chair, eyed glazed with thought, cigar jammed into one corner of his mouth. The sound of footsteps in the hall outside did not stir him. But a loud knock did.

He growled, "Come in."

The door opened. Bertie Browne entered, followed by Joe Angelo. Behind them came a dozen heavy-footed men, somber-faced. They crowded into the room, and the last man closed the door.

Caig did not move. But his cigar jutted straight out before him. A green cold fire crept into his eyes.

The men stood around silently, a little uneasy. A long minute passed.

Then Caig—"Well, why the hell the parade?"

Bertie Browne cleared his throat. "Eh —um—"

"Come on!" growled Caig.

"Eh—well—y' see, Sard, the boys feel we oughter pop over the river and—"

"Dat's it!" boomed Joe Angelo. "We go over and busta up dat town and get da grub, dat's what we do!"

Caig droned, "Oh . . . yeah?"

"Yeah—yeah!" snarled Joe Angelo.

Caig sat up. His eyes snapped over the men. "Is that what all of you say?"

A man stepped forward. "A few hundred of us, Sard."

Caig slouched back again. A sardonic, weary smile drew down one side of his mouth. He drawled, "The power of the Queen!"

"Ow, Sard, lookit 'ere. Hit's time, old son I s'y—"

"You shut up!" snapped Caig. "She's bewitched the whole stinking lot of you. And I don't know how she ever even scraped the surface of my skin. But—I let her scrape it—just a little—and—"

Joe Angelo said, "You wanna be careful from how you spik!"

"Pipe down, wop!" droned Caig, and remained motionless, impassive for fully two minutes. Then he stood up, squared his shoulders, placed his hard, blunt eyes on the men.

"All right. You've gone over my head, but by the cursed stars you can't make me crawl! I'm still Sard Caig, I'm still tough, and—I'll lead you. None of you guys alone could lead a child by the hand without stumbling. I'll do it!"

"Ooray f'r Sard!" shouted Bertie Browne.

"Stop!" barked Caig. "Can the flowers. I'll show you that I'm still better than any six of you put together. Now get out. Get your guns and oil 'em. Meet downstairs in an hour. Get the men there, all of them. I'll be there to give instructions. Now—out."

They turned and filed out. The last to go was Bertie Browne. He paused on the threshold, looked meekly at Caig.

"S'y, Sard, old bean, don't go actin' like 'at. Honest to Gawd, I'm wit' yer—"

"Out, you."

The door closed behind Bertie Browne.

Sard Caig, the hard, was alone. He stood with his hands clenched. His blue-jaw glinted in the light from the oil-lamp. His eyes were twin green points of fire beneath his bent brows. His lips were knotted against his teeth. He stood rooted to the floor.

The door opened slowly, softly. Queenie Carrera stood there, hand on hip, a cheerful empty smile on her face. But gradually that smile faded, and in its place came a white numb look.

And from the cavern of Caig's throat came two, low, harsh, grating words:

"Get out!"

Queenie moved back into the hall and the door closed as noiselessly as it had opened.

XI

NEW HOPE—snow-blanketed in the darkness on the shore of the wilderness river. Town lights twinkling in the frosty gloom. Sentries strung out along the river and around the town. The wind, a keen far-off voice. Games and merriment at a standstill. The King's Palace Bar turned into a barracks where men lay

in rows on blankets with their guns close at hand. Somewhere on a far hill a wolf sending its lost-soul wail to the heavens.

Lola Costigan sat in her living room. She sat at a table that had on it an oil-lamp with a green shade. Her hands were folded on the table. Her lips were moving as though in prayer.

Doc Morrow stood by one of the windows. He was fully clothed for the trail. A rifle leaned against the wall beside him. His hands were in his pockets. His eyes were blank meditative eyes on the frosted window. He saw nothing but the parade of his thoughts.

Presently a loud rap struck the door. Morrow started, cleared his throat, went over and opened the door.

King rocked in, mackinawed, fur cap snug on his big head. A rifle was slung over his shoulder.

"What news?" asked Morrow.

"None yet. All the sentries are out. Most of the men are in the bar, a lot are marking time in the store, and some more are in my office. And the cursed wolves are yowling again!"

He left Morrow and strode to the table. He looked down at Lola with keen gray eyes. She looked up at him with calm blue ones.

He said, "I've been thinking. You're at the edge of town here, and it's dangerous. I wish you'd come up to the bar and remain upstairs until we see—what—happens."

"If you want me to . . ." She shrugged.

"What I came here for," he said.

She got up and went into another room.

Morrow said, "Oh, Brad, I hope they don't."

"I do too," muttered King, grave eyes on the floor. "But I don't think we'll get our hope. That woman is behind them—she would not let an opportunity like this go by. And Caig—he's there too. Though I don't thing Caig would kill a man if he could ruin him in another way."

Lola appeared buttoning her fur coat. She stopped by the table.

"I'll blow out the light," she said.

King and Morrow stepped out into the street, and Lola blew out the light and joined them, locking the door. They walked up the dark, cold street. Half a dozen men trooped past carrying rifles.

Lola said, "Listen to the wolves!"

They passed King's big log storehouse, under guard of twenty men. They crossed the street and proceeded toward the Palace Bar. A crowd of men stood out front, talking, waiting. King led the way in through a side door and up to a room above. Morrow dropped off downstairs.

King lit a lamp on a small table, and waved his hand around the room. "You'll be safer here, in the heart of the town. But"—he drew a revolver from a desk drawer and laid it on the table—"if anyone tries to break in, use this. More shells in the drawer. Under no conditions go out."

He stood for a moment looking around the room, went and tried the two windows, locked them—then said, "Well, that's about all." He drew on his mittens and tramped toward the door.

Lola said, "Wait a moment," in a hushed voice.

King turned, said nothing, looked at her steadily, impersonally.

She sat down at the table, drew off her gloves, looked at her white hands. "At a time like this—one should say things that are deep in the heart. I think false pride should be forgotten. I want to apologize for the things I said to you at Tagish and on the trail after you picked me up. I don't think you're a despot. I don't think you're a brute. I've seen many things since I came here—and I've changed my mind about you. Dr. Morrow could tell you that. Will you shake hands with me?"

He came toward her very gravely, his hand held before him. He took her hand in his big hand, looked down at her with his grave gray eyes, and said:

"This is no effort on my part. I knew how you felt toward me this afternoon after I'd made that speech. I saw you singing that trail song. I felt like going down to you then, but this cursed pride of mine held me back. It was strange—believe it or not—that when I saw you singing, cheering me with the men, I suddenly felt that I wasn't lonely any more. That is God's honest truth."

While they still held hands she smiled up at him and asked, "You have been a lonely man, haven't you?"

He flexed his lips, said with a shrug, "Let's not talk about that." He gave her

hand a warm pressure, smiled into her tender blue eyes.

"You're the most wonderful woman I've ever known, Lola Costigan. You said that at a time like this, when only God knows what will happen to us, we should tell the things that are deep in our hearts. Well, this—this is deep in my heart: I love you."

HE remained leaning on his rigid arms, his eyes on her white face. She looked at her hands. She turned her head and looked at the window. She looked back at her hands. She said, hardly above a whisper:

"Isn't it strange that I should love you too?"

He moved around the table, put a finger beneath her chin. She rose slowly, lips a little parted, color flooding her face. With a little cry she closed in his arms, and for one ecstatic moment they forgot past, present and future—forgot the dread doom that hung over the town, knew only the rapture of the kiss.

Far distant, a shot cracked.

Both stiffened. Lips parted, and they stood in each other's arms, looking into each other's eyes.

"It's come!" whispered King.

She clung to him. "Oh, dear God, have mercy on us! Brad, be careful! Be careful, dear! That this should come—when we have found such happiness."

"Through it," he muttered, "we found this happiness. I must go, sweetheart. Stay in this room. Hear the men downstairs? I must go. Good-bye."

One last mad embrace, and then Lola dropped to knees and prayed while King bolted through the door and thundered down the stairway into the street.

A MAN came galloping down the street shouting, "In the timber on the hill back o' the diggings!"

Bar and King's office poured men into the street.

King jumped out into the middle of the street, held up his hands. The runner brought up gasping for breath. He pointed toward the hill back of the diggings.

"Up there. We saw 'em moving in the trees, mobs o' them! They must have crossed the river way up and worked back on this shore!"

King clipped, "All right, Ted." Then he swung around. "Ready, men! Slim Drone, you stay in town with thirty men, right here in front of the bar. Ted, warn the men at my storehouse. Go on and warn the sentries at the other end of town. Remember, Slim, hold the bar at any cost!"

"Okey, Brad."

"Now—the rest of you—with me! Let's mush!"

He started off down the street, and eighty armed men fell in behind him. Eighty pairs of booted and moccasined feet crunched on the hard-packed snow. Eighty hearts beat beneath shaggy moosehide and grimy mackinaws. Eighty pairs of lips were set in grim determination. Thirty sentries surrounded the town. Twenty men guarded the diggings on the slope. Twenty more guarded the precious storehouse, and others remained to guard King's office building, wherein a fortune in nuggets and dust was stored. Two hundred-odd rifles against the enemy.

Doc Morrow marched beside King, and King said, "I told you to stay out of this, Doc."

"One for all and all for one," said Doc Morrow.

And behind them the tramp—tramp—tramp of marching feet, and above them the low, cold stars twinkling in the silent vault of the polar sky.

When they had passed the last house in the street and come out at the beginning of the slope, Brad called a halt.

"We'll spread out here. Doc, you on the right wing. Massey, you on the left. The twenty men guarding the diggings will join us. Those birds in the woods can't beat around to the right because we'd get 'em on the bald knoll. If they go to the left, it will mean the river. They can sweep down the hill, and it looks like good brain work that led them to where they are. All right. Let's go."

The men spread out, and presently they began to move up the slope toward the mines, taking advantage of ditches and upthrown mounds of frozen earth. King came upon a dozen men crouched around a crane and had a few words with them. He sent the word down the line to halt, and the men dropped down behind the frozen mounds, in frozen ditches, behind machinery and little shacks. A hundred yards up

the slope was the edge of the dark forest and it looked like one solid black wall.

XII

KING, kneeling behind a mound of newly turned earth, looked down at the town lights and thought of the girl, Lola, waiting in the little room above the bar. It had not been a tremendous shock when she told him she loved him, just as it had been no great effort on his part to tell her that he loved her. It all seemed natural, as if both had been holding back a secret that was, after all, no secret to either one of them. And could he ever thank Doc Morrow for what he had done on the trail? His own pride-bound skull would have parted them forever at some town farther south!

He turned and looked toward the dark forest. A wind blew sharply against his face. On either side of him men gripped rifles and waited and stared at the black wall of the forest. This was an epic of the North that would be written in blood—two towns in arms against each other.

And King mused, "Here I have millions. I own this town, every house on it. My name is known from Fort Yukon to Dyea. I have the love of a wonderful woman. Yet one small piece of lead can kill me." It began to occur to him how small a mote man was in the scheme of things—whether he had one dollar or three million.

Suddenly a dozen spurts of flame ripped from the forest wall. Bullets whistled overhead. Here and there in King's line of defense a few rifles barked. More bursts came from the forest, but the enemy was well-concealed, and it was a waste of lead to fire at flashes when men hid behind trees.

A man said to King, "Hey, boss, why don't we rush them guys?"

"No. We're defending the town."

He crouched behind the rampart of frozen earth, his gun idle in the crook of his arm. He watched the desultory firing from the forest. He heard lead plop into hard ground, ring sharply against machinery. But he did not fire. The men about him were restless. Low curses drifted through the cold darkness. He knew how dangerous it would be to rush up the hill and try to storm the woods. He felt that the lives of his men were in his hands.

There were fifteen minutes of silence, of watchful waiting, tension—with men shivering in the cold. Then a thunder of rifle fire from afar. King pivoted on one knee and looked back toward the town. Beyond the town he saw red eyes of flaming guns winking in the darkness. His hair might have stood on end, he did not know.

But he shouted, "A trick! The main force is attacking from the south. These birds in the woods are decoys. Wait! Twenty of you men hold these diggings. Word down the line to Cressey to stay here with the twenty men nearest him. Word down the line to Doc Morrow to drive toward the town. Quick about it, men!"

His orders clicked down the line. Cressey began counting off his men. King sloped down the hill, hunched way over, his men flanking out behind him. The twenty men who stayed behind began firing at the woods, twenty rifles spitting lead and flame into the darkness to cover the retreat of the main body.

Beyond the town the rifles were shattering the night, and cries and shouts of men in battle mingled with the gunfire. King and his men swooped down the hill and galloped into the town. Hard lines of men were grouped in front of the bar, in front of the office building, around the storehouse.

Down at the end of the street a handful of sentries crouched behind cabins and tried to hold back the horde that was booming toward the southern gateway of the town. Down toward the end street drove King and his sixty fighting men. They saw the horde sweeping in upon the town, saw the blazing muzzles, heard the shouts of the enemy.

King's men spread to the shelter of the cabins at the edge of town. Their guns spoke a bitter language of defiance. Windows crashed. Lead slammed into stout walls. The leaders of the horde reached the gateway and bullied their way past the first cabins. Guns snarled at close range. Men went down with wild death cries, and other men vaulted over their fallen bodies.

The street reverberated with the shots and shouts of guns and men in fierce combat. A hundred of the enemy assailed the southern entrance, and the defenders closed in hand to hand combat and strove mightily

to keep the battle at the end of the street.

Then another horde slammed into the rear of the town, to charge the bar and the storehouse, sweeping the sentries before them. The thirty men in front of the bar, the twenty in front of the office, joined to meet this new attack. While up on the diggings the twenty there were holding the decoys in the forest.

IN a chaos of conflict, on the brink of sudden death, King had still time to realize that Caig planned a neat attack. No man but Caig could have done that. One of his own men, leaping across his path, was mowed down by three shots, and a cursing man jumped over his falling body. King shot that man down in his tracks, and ducked violently to get out of the way of an enemy muzzle that was swinging toward his chest.

He blinked his eyes, saw Doc Morrow wield a gun-butt and send that man a crumpled thing to the hard cold snow. Beyond Morrow was a man swinging a gun toward the back of his head. With a click of teeth King fired past Morrow's shoulder, dangerously close, and stopped the enemy's shot.

Down between the bar and the office building the fighting was close and furious; two hundred men in swift, deadly combat, wielding guns, shooting, slashing viciously with knives. Shots knocked out window after window, lead hammered against frame buildings. Oaths and threats and prayers and death-cries rang from men's throats, and gun smoke writhed around twisting, toiling bodies. Men trampled and stumbled over other men who had gone down. Blood-streaked faces were grimly set or wildly vicious in the red flash of gunfire.

In the thick of it was Sard Caig, the hard, a cyclone of fury, hatless, face smeared with blood, lips snarled across teeth, green eyes blazing. Hiding behind one of the cabins was Bertie Browne, whimpering in his throat, watching the fight with fear-ridden eyes. Slinking on the edge of the battle was Joe Angelo, rifle gripped in calloused hands, black eyes forever searching for a face which as yet he had not seen.

He came upon Sard Caig, and he saw Caig raise rifle to shoulder and aim at a man who was heaving through a knot of other men. That man was King. Angelo snarled and knocked down Caig's rifle, and Caig whirled, saw Angelo's dark, sinister face.

Joe Angelo snarled. "He is mine, Sard! Dat he is! For Queenie I killa dat bum —and Queenie and me—"

"Fool!" roared Caig, swinging his rifle toward King again.

Joe Angelo fired into Caig's side, and Caig went down groaning, and feet tramped over him. Joe Angelo jumped to look for King, but King was gone. Joe Angelo swore.

King was fighting with his men in front of the bar. One of his eyes had been blackened. His jaw was bleeding. There was a cut on his left cheek. And through the smoke and flame he saw Lola standing in the doorway of the bar. He cried out, choked by the smoke.

He bounded toward the door, hurled in and fell with her. He slammed the door.

"Lola, for God's sake, don't show yourself! Get upstairs!"

"I can't! Oh, Brad, don't go out again! Don't! If you die I'll die too! Please, Brad, for love of me—!"

He said no more. He lifted her in his arms and ran up the stairs with her, into the room above, set her down and stood choking for breath above her.

"Stay here, Lola! I command it! Stay here!"

She gripped his arms, clung desperately to them. "You too, Brad! What can one man do out there when there are hundreds? And all the hundreds don't matter as much to me as you!"

"Be quiet, Lola! I've got to go! They're my men! Let me go! I love you, but let me go! *Let—me—go!*"

By sheer superior strength he tore free of her arms, stood wide-eyed, breathing hard. Then spun and dived for the door. But it burst open before he reached it. Joe Angelo heaved in with a crazed scream, and blazing, lustful eyes.

The muzzle of his gun belched, and the room thundered. But passion had shaken his hand, and the bullet whistled past King's ear. Then King had him, had him in mighty arms, whirling him about the room, his own rifle on the floor. His left hand clenched Angelo's gun hand; close to his own face was Angelo's dark, rage-con-

torted face, lips spitting oaths, eyes red with murder.

"That's the second time, wop!" gritted King. "And this is the end of you!"

His right fist whipped upward and crashed against Angelo's jaw. His left hand wrenched Angelo's wrist, and the gun flew free and clear across the room. King released it, saw Angelo go for his knife. King plowed into him, broke his nose with a sledge-hammer left, laid open his cheek with a vicious right. Saw Angelo's jaw drop, his eyes become blank.

Joe Angelo reeled backward, far off his balance. He crashed with the back of his head into one of the windows, shattered the glass, fell through and smashed to the street below.

"Brad! Brad!" cried Lola, flinging toward him.

He caught her, gripped her hard, kissed her furiously. Then said, "Now back to the street!"

He almost threw her away. He picked up his rifle, lunged down the stairs, joined his fighting men. Slim Drone heaved up beside him.

"They're breaking up, Brad! Lookit them!"

The invaders were retreating up the street in the direction of the mines, not rapidly, but slowly, fighting to hold their ground. And the men of New Hope were fighting to save their town, to drive the enemy out. Fighting with the high spirit of men who know they are in the right.

King sailed down among them, shouting encouragement, boring his way up to the front.

OUT on the river ice a man was reeling drunkenly. But he was not drunk. Sometimes he fell, but he did not remain inert. He kept crawling on hands, and knees, groaning hoarsely, cursing, muttering. When he had strength enough to rise, he did so and then reeled onward, staggering from left to right. Behind him he heard the tumult of the battle in New Hope. But he never looked back. He looked toward Jackman on the other shore.

He pitched forward on his face as he reached it. For a few minutes he lay inert, his body convulsed. Then his gloved fingers scraped against the frozen snow. He toiled to his knees, braced himself on his hands, got one foot against the snow beneath him, then struggled to his feet. For a moment he stood there swaying, then lunged as though he were going to fall. But he did not fall.

He staggered onward—into the main street of Jackman. He reached the saloon, fell through the door, stared with glazed eyes at the empty bar. He crawled across the floor to a stairway, then labored up the steps, groaning, muscles bulging on his bloody jaw.

At the top he lay still for a while. Finally he gripped the bannister, gritted his teeth, hauled himself up to his feet. His body shook, there was a rattle in his throat. He dragged his feet down the corridor, came to a door, grabbed the knob and swung in with the door. He swayed to the center of the room, stopped, braced his legs far apart and looked down at Queenie Carrera, who lay on a divan smoking a cigarette. The cigarette fell from her lips to the floor and lay smoking. Her hands flew to her breast.

He dragged his gun from his pocket.

Queenie screamed.

Caig's gun boomed.

Queenie, half risen, fell back to the divan, convulsed once, then lay motionless.

Caig chuckled, blew into the muzzle of his gun, tossed the gun on the divan. He lurched to the window, threw it open, leaned out breathing deeply. He saw the shapes of many men running across the moonlit river ice toward Jackman, saw the leaders reach the shore below.

He stepped back, smiled thinly to himself—then grimaced, put a hand to his throat and crashed heavily to the floor.

XIII

NEW HOPE. Torn and bullet-riddled but victorious.

The men of New Hope stood on the river ice and watched the stragglers of Caig's invading army disappearing in the gloom of the Jackman shore. The defenders of New Hope were ragged, sleeves and pants torn by knife thrusts, many hatless, shaggy mops of hair slopping down over scarred and bloody foreheads.

King stood in front of them, arms raised, palms toward them. His loud voice rang in the night—"Let them go! We've saved

the town, driven them off! That's all we want!"

A voice complained, "But, hell, Brad, why don't we go over and burn Jackman? Give them guys what they deserve!"

"No use. They won't remain in Jackman. They'll go south, which they should have done in the first place. Back into the street, men! There's wounded there—and dead! Work to be done!"

There were a few grumbles but these died, and gradually the men turned and tramped upon the shore, into the bloodied street. A dark sea of men flowing into a street that was deathly quiet now.

A lighted window above the bar, and Lola leaning out, framed there against the light of the room.

Doc Morrow called, "Come down, Lola. There'll be men wanting the touch of your hand."

When she came into the street King was waiting for her. Their hands met.

"The fighting's over," he said, "but our job isn't done yet."

"No," she said. "Now I can help."

"Lola, you'd better not—"

"But I want to, Brad."

The hospital doors were flung open, and the cabins nearest it were flung open too receive the wounded. The dead were carried into King's office. The men worked throughout the dark hours, into the dawn and through the dawn to the gray cold day.

Doc Morrow worked beyond what seemed like all powers of endurance. Lola was his second in command, with her cool hands and quiet, gentle voice. King worked with them, running errands, shifting the wounded, carrying hot water. No task was too humble for him.

When he could do no more for the wounded, he went about identifying the dead and got together a gang of men to bury the dead. He himself read the burial service from a tattered Bible. Night was down upon New Hope again before that task was finished. The last man was buried as the first star winked.

King was alone in his office at eight, disheveled hair over his ears, face lined with weariness, lips pursed against his teeth. His left eye, blacked by a glancing blow from a gun-butt, was completely shut. His jaw swollen.

There was a commotion outside the door. King was too tired to even stir a foot. When the door banged open two of his men came in with Bertie Browne. Bertie was holding a white flag.

"Hit's a truce!" he yelped.

"Let him go, men," grunted King.

One of the men came over and handed King a revolver. "He was totin' this."

Bertie said, "Sard gave hit to me, King. Sard's dead. 'E died just as I got back. 'E told me to 'and it to you if you was alive. 'E put a notch in hit, sayin' hit was the first time 'e ever committed a murder personal. 'E murdered Queenie, King. Shot 'er smack in the 'eart after 'e crawled back to Jackman. And 'e says to me, 'Bertie, tyke this gun to King, what is a king. An' tell 'im f'r me 'at Queenie was a devil and she won't ruin no more guys. She ruined me.' So 'ere I bring hit, King, along wit' Sard's dyin' regards. Jackman's deserted. I'm 'eadin' south."

King looked at the gun, at the fresh cut in the butt. He hefted it, laid it on his desk. Then he said to his men:

"Escort this man to the edge of town."

The men took Bertie out.

After a while Lola came in, came over to King and put an arm around his neck and laid his head against her breast. . . .

THE famine was breaking up. Men were beginning to appear on the trails again, and King's fame spread throughout the Yukon. The lost-soul call of the wolf was no longer heard in the white silences. Settlers came to New Hope, and men went out of their way to meet Brad King.

On the day that King and Lola were married the town was strung with banners. A band played. Men turned out to line the streets, and steam whistles shrilled on the slope back of the town. When King appeared in the street with his bride a thunder of voices rose to greet him. He walked straight as he always walked, with Lola beside him.

Then began a chant of voices, a rhythmic beating of feet on the packed snow. The brave old trail song:

King! King! King!
King of the Yukon Trail!
Bing! Bing! Bing!
Hail to the King! *Hail!*

Land Beyond the Law

By H. S. M. KEMP

The Mounted branded him coward! And silently Crawford bore their scorn—with lips sealed by a red-coated ghost in that blizzard-swept land beyond the Law!

THE man stopped his dogs before the orderly-room door, stood for a moment in semi-abstraction, then slowly shed his mits.

There was a look in his eyes which told of a desperate strain. You would have placed his age at forty—and overshot the mark by twenty years. His cheeks were frost-blackened and cracked; his shoulders sagged under an invisible load. Even the dogs gave evidence of a great effort; already they were down, licking their blood-stained paws.

Crawford had come through hell. A desolate hell of days in the empty solitude of the North. From the Height o' Land country beyond the Churchill south to the crooked reaches of the Saskatchewan he had followed his grisly load—the bundle of fire-charred flesh and whitening bones that once had been a man. For nineteen days that grim pack had been his sole companion; he had traveled with it, boiled the kettle in its company, camped with it of nights. Once, when a roaring blizzard swept down from the Circle, he had taken refuge in a rotting Indian shack. Four days was he cooped up there, his load inside with him. Outside, the half-famished dogs whined hungrily, scratching at the crack beneath the door.

Even before he had started south there had been a strain—the watchful, never-ceasing hunt for a man turned wolf, the task of running down Dog-Tooth Louis Le Maire—and now that the end of the trail had come, Crawford seemed at a loss to know what to do. He turned about, shook the clinging snow from his parka-hood, then, still half-abstractedly, moved toward the building before him.

But others had seen his arrival. Two men in the uniform of the Police came down the steps. They hailed him cheerily, seized his hand.

"Back again, eh? How's th' kid? . . . Good trip?"

The questioning suddenly ceased. They had seen Crawford's sleigh and the contours of the cover lashed to it. Frowning, one of the men turned quickly.

"Who's that?" he snapped. "Dog-Tooth?"

Crawford shook his head slowly. "No."

"Not him?" The speaker suddenly went wide-eyed. "'Tisn't . . . 'tisn't Jim, is it?" he blurted.

"Yes. Jim."

The man sucked a quick breath through his teeth. "God!."

A tense silence fell; the two from the orderly-room eyed each other uneasily, looked to Crawford for an explanation.

"Who got him?" asked one of them at length. "Dog-Tooth?"

"Yeh; Dog-Tooth." Then: "Where's the Old Man?" asked Crawford, dully.

"What?" A new light suddenly came into the eyes of the man addressed. "Oh, Lord! I forgot about that. . . . What a hell of a wallop for him!"

"Where is he?" Crawford asked again.

"In his office. Are you going to see him?"

"Guess so," answered Crawford, and turned on his heel.

"Say, wait a minute! Let me go. Maybe I can break it a bit easier. . . ."

But Crawford gave no sign that he had heard.

SUPERINTENDENT BELL, "Daddy" Bell to the two-score men under his command, had grown old in the Service. His hair was white, his jaws grizzled, but the faded blue eyes were keen and alert.

As Crawford was ushered into the room the officer looked up quickly.

"Why, man . . ." he exclaimed. "Whatever's the matter? Sick?"

"No, sir."

"Then, what is it?"

Crawford seemed to steel himself, standing stiffly at attention.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have bad news for you—the worst."

The Superintendent started. "What do you mean?"

"Your son—Constable Bell . . ." replied Crawford, suggestively.

"Dead?" The question was a whisper.

Crawford nodded. "Shot through the head."

For a moment the officer closed his eyes; seemed to sway. Then he got a grip on himself.

"Tell me," he ordered, and wet his lips.

"I did as you ordered, sir—went up to Lobstick Portage and joined Constable Bell in his search for Dog-Tooth. After a while we split; he went east and I went west. A week later I got back to our shack, and I found it burned to the ground—he with it.

"There was enough left to tell me all I wanted to know: Jim was shot through the head from behind and the shack burned over him to cover the deed." Crawford hesitated. "He's out on my sleigh, sir. I knew you'd like to have him brought in."

The Superintendent was staring straight before him, motionless, unseeing. The only color in his face was the blue of his lips.

"Can I get you something?" offered Crawford. "Brandy, a little whiskey . . . ?"

Instead of replying, the O. C. keeled over in his chair.

"I TELL yuh, he's yaller, yaller as they come."

Thus Corporal "Sandy" Scott, glaring belligerently at his listeners. These were three: Smith and Nibbs, constables, and Sergeant "Bobby" Byrnes, called in to take in hand the Dog-Tooth Louis case.

Four days had elapsed, four days in which "Daddy" Bell hovered on the thin boundary between life and death. During that time much had happened.

Byrnes grinned easily.

"Tell me all about it, Rufus. I can't argue with you if I don't know anything—and all the S. M. hasn't told me would fill quite a book."

Scott's glare lost none of its truculence.

"Yuh know Crawford went up with 'Jim to locate Dog-Tooth? Yeh. And yuh know that Dog-Tooth plugged Jim and burnt him up, don't yuh? Well—s'pose yuhr partner was shot down like that, would yuh make a try at th' bird that done it, or would yuhr lungs go suddenly weak?"

Byrnes grinned again. "No good at riddles, me," he demurred.

"Look-a-here!" Scott began to pound a fist into a ham-like palm. "Dog-Tooth got let outa Edmonton pen this summer. No sooner did he get back to th' Lobstick country than these hold-ups begin. 'Daddy' sent Crawford up t' give Jim a hand. Jim gets shot, and Crawford brings him in. Nach'ly the S. M. gives Crawford a chance for another crack at Dog-Tooth—and then what happens? Crawford goes sick . . . his lungs are on th' tramp.

"But here comes th' joker: When the M. O. shoves that headphone-hoojah on his chest, there ain't a thing th' matter

with him—heart, lungs, nor stomick. Hell!" snarled Scott. "We know what it is—he's yaller, got th' wind up! If yuh'r me had gone up there Jim'd be alive today. 'Stead of which he's a bunch of fried bones with a hole in him."

The grin left Byrnes' face.

"May be something in what you say. But you've got to remember that Crawford's only a kid. He was born and raised in the North, and he's not used to handling messes like you and me are. Anyway, that trip bringing Jim down was hard on his nerves."

"On his *nerves!*" snorted Scott. "Whaja mean—shell-shock?"

Byrnes grunted. "Maybe. Anyhow, I can't expect a hide-bound bull like you to understand."

Scott tried to pick an insult out of the sergeant's words, but gave it up in favor of the matter in hand.

"If that's what it is, why'n hell don't he clear out . . . pack his duds and light? Nobody 'ud stop him, yuh can bet on that!"

"He needs the hint," chuckled Nibbs mirthlessly. "This'll fix it."

"Hist!" Scott gave warning. "Here he comes."

Nibbs ran swiftly across the room, dropped a sheet of paper onto a bunk and came back to his seat. Then the door opened and Crawford himself stepped in.

The four days since his arrival had even intensified the air of tragedy he carried. His cheeks were haggard and there was an odd, hunted look in his eyes. But as he caught sight of the sergeant his head went up in a gesture of strange defiance, and he crossed the room toward the spare bunk.

There Nibb's note was waiting for him.

The other men saw him pick it up and commence to read. Slowly the color left his face, and the muscles of his jaw ran into little knots. They saw him blink once, twice . . . then, swallowing hard, he turned and left the room.

Curious, Byrnes heaved himself up and retrieved the paper Crawford had left behind. He, too, read it, but half aloud:

"Like the vine round the trunk of the tree,
The Law runneth forward and back.
For the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack."

For a moment he was silent; then he bunched the paper up in his big hands.

"Kipling, eh?" he observed slowly. "Lot of truth in it, too. But I don't think, Sandy, I'd have done just that."

"Why not?" flared the redhead. "Don't he need it?"

"Maybe. But it was a mite brutal, wasn't it? And," he added, "it sounds to me like kicking a man when he's down."

There came hurried footsteps, cutting off the corporal's retort, and a bare-headed constable burst into the room.

Byrnes wheeled; caught the man's eyes. "What's up?" he snapped.

"The 'Old Man' . . ."

"What about him?"

"Dead. . . . Another heart attack! S. M. wants you on the run."

And leaving a staggered group behind, the constable hurried out.

FOR four days the flag at the Post hung at half-mast; then came the funeral, simple in the characteristic manner of the police. After that, Divisional Headquarters of "F" went back to its daily round.

Byrnes laid out his gear for traveling and looked about him for a man to take with him to Lobstick Portage. By evening his choice lay between Nibbs and Smith, and he moved outside in search of the sergeant-major. But once clear of the building, footsteps overtook him. He turned and found Crawford following him.

"Want me?" inquired Byrnes.

"Yes." Crawford seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Say, Sergeant, have you picked a man for your trip North?"

"I guess so," replied Byrnes vaguely. "Why?"

"Because, er . . . wonder if you'd take me?"

"You?" The sergeant laid on more emphasis than he knew. "Why, I thought . . ."

"There's no need to finish it. Smith, and Scott, and Nibbs . . . I know what you're going to say," cut in Crawford, bitterly.

"What's the idea?" Byrnes put the blunt question. "You got one chance to go, and you turned it down. Turned it down on a bluff. Anyway," he said, steeling himself, "I've got to have a man I can depend on."

"For heaven's sake, don't rub it in!" In the darkness Crawford's words were almost wrung from him. "I can't stay here; since the Old Man went West the others look at me as though I'd killed him. Take me along; I'll show you whether you can depend on me!"

Byrnes was silent a moment. "You're in no shape for traveling. That last trip of yours about finished you," he growled.

"I'm all right," insisted Crawford. "All I want is the chance."

There was no mistaking the other's sincerity, and Byrnes wavered.

"Look here, kid," he said, the roughness of his voice covering something that lay beneath. "I'll think it over. Scotty's been riding you pretty hard, and it's no bed of roses you've got here. . . . Come and see me in the morning; I'll tell you then."

And in the morning he had made his decision.

"You get the chance, Crawford," he said. "Just once. I'll watch you, and be fair with you, but if you ever show a sign of cracking-up—look out!"

For the first time in days, a speck of color came into Crawford's cheeks.

"You're a white man, Sarge. I won't let you down." And he hurried away before Byrnes should see what was in his eyes.

But Scott, the vitriolic, laughed savagely.

"Takin' that punk!" he hooted. "Why, yuh're crazier'n . . ."

"Listen!" snapped the sergeant with equal savageness. "Some bull-headed fools like you fight because they don't know what fear is, or because they haven't brains enough to quit. Others let their imaginations run away with them for a time; but when they come back . . . Look out! Me, I'm betting on Crawford."

And Sergeant "Bobby" Byrnes went to complete his preparations for the North.

BEYOND the Churchill and west of Reindeer Lake are several thousand square miles of blank wilderness; and it was in this desolation that Byrnes and Crawford began their task.

Two days of discreet inquiries gained them the information that Dog-Tooth Louis had gone, vanished from his old haunts. The police were advised to try further north. Try they did, and twice on the road they received first-hand evidence that they were on the right scent. Two more robberies they found, but both, fortunately, had occurred when the victims were away from home. The fear-stricken Indians did not refer to the outlaw any more as Louis, or Dog-Tooth. Ever apt at nicknames, they rechristened him "The Snake," and Byrnes judged the name appropriate.

On went the police, running down false clues, but ever returning to the trail they sought. And, gradually, winnowing the grain from the chaff, came at last on one lone track.

That track avoided the camps with uncanny precision. This fact told the two white men much.

"Get it?" asked Byrnes. "He's got all the fur he can safely handle, so he's dodging the haunts of man. Another thing, his direction is northwest. Does that mean anything?"

"It sure does. He's either making for the McKenzie country, or else he's going to angle southwest after a while and hit the McMurray railway."

"Correct. And our job's to nail him before he does."

By the signs around the boiling-places and the camps of the fleeing man, they judged him to be three days ahead, but eight days of forced travel cut the margin down to a bare one. Then a new worry came to assail Byrnes.

"We're low on dog-feed and grub—and right there lies the danger."

Crawford nodded soberly.

"He'll hear us shooting."

"Yeh. But it can't be helped. Played-out dogs don't mean speed."

That evening they came on a dozen stragglers from the southward-migrating caribou. Byrnes shot two; and the echoes of the firing crashed around them in deafening peals. The sergeant's jaw set hard.

"There it is . . . for better, for worse."

It was for worse. For the following day, and the days after that, they were to know that the fugitive had been warned by those shots. The trail struck suddenly south, touched Vermilion Lake, then headed again for Cree Lake and the edge of the Barrens. The Snake, wily as in Solomon's day, was trying to shake them off.

But he did not succeed. His pursuers lengthened their daily travel, cut down on

their hours of rest, and though the effort was killing, neither complained. Both were worn to mere shadows, their faces blackened and peeling from countless frost-bites, their feet raw from the snowshoe-thongs.

One night, in the miserable shelter of a few straggy jackpines, the two men went into camp. The cold was intense, and a knife-edged wind cut through parkas and heavy underwear. Byrnes was moody, silent; Crawford uneasy, nervous. The sergeant began to spread his robe for the night, while the other picked up the ax and moved back into the shadows, searching for the few dried sticks he might find. Ten minutes he was gone, then with sharp suddenness, the silence of the night was broken by the nearby crash of a single shot.

Crawford spun around; listened.

"Hullo, Bob! Are you all right?" he yelled.

There was no answer save the clamorous barking of the dogs.

With fear clutching him for what he might find, the constable rushed through the trees toward the camp.

There his worst fears were realized. Byrnes was on his face before the fire, and as he rolled him over, Crawford's hands felt the warm stickiness of human blood.

The Snake had struck again.

TWO hours went by before the sergeant recovered consciousness. Crawford had discovered the wound, an ugly hole grazing the right lung. Now it was plugged with a compress from the emergency-kit.

Byrnes groaned; tried to rise; then fell back weakly.

"What's up . . . where am I?" Suddenly he twinged. "Whew! my side."

Crawford told him as tersely as he could.

"It's a dirty one, Bob. Your only chance is for me to rush you back as quick as I can."

Byrnes was fully conscious now. Through his pain-clouded eyes he shot Crawford a swift look.

"Back!" he repeated in amazement. "You go back . . . *again?*"

Sudden color flooded Crawford's cheeks, and he reeled as though from a blow in the face.

"Good Lord!" he choked. For a moment he swallowed hard; then: "Hang it all, man, I'm thinking about *you!* Not me, nor Dog-Tooth, nor anybody else!"

Byrnes' eyes closed. "Sorry, old man," he said quietly. "I didn't understand."

Through the age-long night, Byrnes drifted from coma to reason, but at the gray dawn he insisted that Crawford leave him and push on. And the constable refused.

"I won't be back for days, weeks, maybe. What'll happen to you?"

"Don't matter," stubbornly. "Your job's to get The Snake."

Crawford snorted in disgust, hooked in the dogs, then loaded the groaning sergeant beneath the robes on the sleigh.

"We started together—we finish together."

And with a curt command to the dogs, once more Crawford took up the following of the trail.

THREE times that day they heard distant firing, and three times came across where the man ahead had killed. At each place he had merely hacked off the best of the carcasses, leaving the rest to the ravens and the wolves. Crawford frowned, shook his head, not understanding the deliberate waste of ammunition; and herded his dogs on past.

The constable forced a terrific pace all that day, and by night the dogs were nearly spent. Still he pushed on, until the huskies came to a place where the man ahead had paused to boil. Here the animals lay down, and despite yells and blows from the whip, refused to move another step.

"Camp, kid." Byrnes suddenly pushed the robe from his face and spoke. "They're all in. So are you, if you only knew it."

Grudgingly Crawford turned into the bluff, turned the dogs loose, and cooked a meal. The sergeant had no desire to eat, but the constable forced a cup of bouillon between his lips. Again he dressed Byrnes' wound, and after that spread his own robe and crawled into its folds.

"I won't sleep," he boasted. "Can't take a chance on that Snake. But it's warm here, anyway."

He reckoned without his own weakness, for when next he opened his eyes, the new day was breaking.

NOTWITHSTANDING the unattended hours, Byrnes' condition was not greatly changed. He reported having slept a little, and if he suffered much he did not mention it.

Breakfast cooked and eaten, Crawford looked around for the dogs. Usually they dug themselves into holes for the night, but now there was no sign of them. He moved about, whistled, frowned when he received no answer.

"Gad!" he breathed. "They're off after deer as sure as fate!" And he started circling the camp to pick up their tracks.

These were no trouble to find; the marks of many pads led through the pines, up over a hill; and Crawford followed on the run.

Suddenly, rounding a huge boulder, he stopped still, the color draining from his face, his lips parted on unuttered words. Before him was a dead caribou, freshly killed, and around it, stretched into grotesque, stiff shapes, lay his six dogs.

"Oh, God!" he gasped. "What's this?"

He moved forward, dropped on his knees by the side of his leader and looked at the rigidness of the limbs and the foam about the snarling lips. Then he knew.

"Strychnine!"

The venom of The Snake; once again he'd struck!

Crawford got shakily to his feet, stumbled back to the camp. There he met the wondering eyes of Byrnes, and in a few words told him what he had found.

For a moment the two men were silent, staggered under the terrific blow; but at last Byrnes spoke a tentative word for the future. Crawford cut him off.

"It's the end," he said, dully. . . . We can't go on; we can't get back." He lifted his face to the trail ahead, then sudden rage flamed into his eyes. "And he goes free . . . The Snake!"

From Byrnes came an unintelligible muttering. Crawford turned to find him again delirious.

"Ye gods!" he gritted through his teeth. "And I'm supposed to keep sane!"

Suddenly, indecision fell from him. He wheeled to the grub-box, shook out the scanty store of food and split it into two piles.

One pile he replaced in the box and put it near the sleigh wherein Byrnes was lying; the other he crammed into the tea pail.

"I'm leaving you, old feller," he muttered. "Running out on you cold. But," grimly, "your chances are as good as mine."

Then putting on his goggles and drawing the parka-hood about his face, he struck off for the trail at a shuffling run.

BY noon eighteen torturing miles lay behind him. Ever, as he traveled, his gaze was on what lay ahead, searching the crystal emptiness. But in vain. The Barrens were destitute of life, and silent and limitless as eternity. But his effort was what the Force demanded. Futile; voluntary suicide; a glorious gesture in the face of certain death.

He looked at the trail, frowned as he noticed the weaving imprint of the snowshoes, and he suddenly knew that the man ahead, The Snake, was drawing down, was weakening like himself.

Crawford stood nonplussed. The snowshoe-tracks were erratic, circling, going a few feet straight, then running in an aimless loop. As he looked it seemed he was watching them in the making, seeing a man running vainly, striving for something he had lost. And a great understanding broke over him.

"Snowblind!" he gasped.

Immediately he followed, forsaking the dog-trail, running at a shambling gait.

One mile, two miles he traveled; skirted bluffs and descended into hollows, then before him lay a white mound. He reached the top, his heart pounding against his ribs —and before him, and not a hundred yards away, was the sprawled-out figure of a man.

Crawford dropped where he was. Mechanically his hand strayed to the butt of the revolver strapped over his parka, waiting for the other man to rise. Through his smarting eyes he watched him; saw the whirling snow-devils sweep on and past, half-burying the motionless figure in a shroud of white. And then he knew that justice for The Snake would not be found in the courts of man-made law.

At last he found his feet and made the short distance that separated him from the man he had come to seek. By his side he stopped, looked at the racquettes lashed to his feet, his mittless, frozen fingers, then stooped and rolled him over on his back.

And while one could count ten, Crawford looked into the blackened, death's-head face of Constable Jim Bell.

THERE was a new skipper at the helm of "F" Division, a younger man than old Superintendent Bell, keen-faced and alert. To him Crawford, long since given up for dead, made his report.

The constable stood at attention, his eyes fixed on the pine-clad hills beyond the muddy Saskatchewan. But he was not thinking of these. He saw the savage North-country; the dazzling mock-suns; the ghost-like bands of caribou drifting across the Barrens.

"We hit his trail south of Burntwood Lake, and followed him north. But we crowded him too close, for one night he ambushed us and shot Sergeant Byrnes. Then, to make sure, he poisoned several caribou carcasses along the trail. One night the dogs ate some of the poisoned meat and died. I couldn't haul Byrnes, so I left him and went on. Finally I found Bell snowblind, frozen stiff as a board, stretched out in the snow."

"But how did you get back?"

"I was able to find his dogs—they hadn't gone far—and though they were about half-dead, they hauled Bell and me to where I had left Byrnes. After that three Chipewyan hunters came across our trail and brought us south to their camp. They were real medicine-men, sir," smiled Crawford, faintly. "For in a week or so they had Byrnes ready for the road. We rested week after that, then started back."

"And that's all?"

"You knew all the time the identity of the man you were after?"

"Certainly. On my first trip up I found that Bell was in desperate straits. He didn't know that I spoke better Cree than English. From hints the Indians let fall I learned that he had lost heavily in gambling, and a search of the books showed that he was short in the funds of the Force. Apparently he chose the bandit method of squaring things, and then, to cover himself, wrote in, pointing suspicion to Dog-Tooth. I imagine Dog-Tooth was in on the deal with him, but later they must have fought and the breed got himself killed. I guessed at once that it was his body that was burned in the shack."

The officer nodded. "And you allowed yourself to be crucified rather than have old Superintendent Bell know that he had raised a murderer and a thief?"

Crawford looked at him levelly.

"He wasn't called 'Daddy' for nothing."

The officer gave a slow smile of perfect understanding.

"But," he objected, "couldn't you have taken Byrnes into your confidence? He'd have kept the knowledge to himself."

Crawford's lean face drew into a grin.

"They called me yellow . . . 'liar' would have been worse."

The O. C. looked at the man before him steadily, striving to read what was going on behind that mask-like face. Then he stood up.

"Crawford," he said, simply, "I'd be proud to shake your hand."

WHEN Crawford stepped into the barrack-room, his story was there before him. Also present was a red-faced corporal, one Scott.

"Kid," said the latter, before Crawford could back out, "I feel lower'n th' belly of a snake . . . and that's on th' ground. I feel so doggoned small that I'd hafta get me a step-ladder t' look a louse in the eye. But, kid, when I'm in wrong, I sure admit it." He hedged. "Er . . . me'n Nibbs wrote yuh a bit of po'try one time—yuh know, 'bout th' wolf and th' pack. It was a crude stunt t' pull, but we didn't know no better. But what I mean is, th' joke's on us—yuh're all wolf, and th' pack's right behind yuh anytime you start out! I'm a poor hand at sayin' what I mean, but yuh know. . . ."

Crawford suddenly laughed aloud, all the bitterness swept away.

"You did right, Corp, as right as you knew. I'm beginning to understand—it's not me, and it's not you; it's the Force behind us that matters."

And he gave his hand into the bear-like grip of Corporal Scott.

A Novelet of The Wilds

Breed of the Timber Wolf

By SGT. DAN O'ROURKE

The blizzard set a trap—Hunger sprang it. . . . And Time tracked back to those ancient days when man and his wild brothers fought the battle of Ice Age tooth and claw.

THE winter of the Great Hunger trapped the Northland in its maw.

The icy wind was a knife that flayed and seared each living thing. The blizzards piled the world with deep-drifted traps that mocked both hunter and hunted. . . . And then it was that the ugly Gods of Hunger held sway, ruling everything that breathed in the frozen wilderness. Hunger changed shy weaklings into remorseless killers, set friend against friend, kin against kin in the crazed quest for food to sustain life.

Mountain, forest, muskeg, barren be-

came places of sudden death. The law of the fang became the first code of the Northland. Kill or be killed. Flee or fight or die. . . .

So hungerland trek began. Silent, flitting shapes hurried southward through the night, threading snow-shrouded aisles of cold, blue spruce. Red eyes gleamed like ghost lights, alert for opportunity to kill. Weasels, fishers, martens, slim bodied killers looped silently before the storm wind. White Arctic wolves and the great Alaskan greys that course in packs struggled through the soft drifts. Foxes, white, black and cross, slipped wraithlike out of hungerland.

And over them all floated those iron-billed killers of the air—the snowy owl, the hawk owl—drifting with silent pinions, drooping talons, keen murderous eyes.

There were bears too, burly oldsters who scorned the luxury of hibernation—great hulking shapes that shuffled along in high dudgeon that the earth-stores—bugs, slugs, roots and lesser rodents—were now denied them.

But more silent, more sinister, more ruthless than all the rest, came Lutin the rogue, sometimes called Carcajou, the wolverine.

It was Lutin's kind of weather and he was thoroughly enjoying himself. His broad flat feet and wide belly that appeared to drag as he waddled clumsily along, bore him splendidly where the more graceful wildlings floundered and fought the snow. Lutin was not nice to look at, neither sweet of smell. Squat, muscular, heavy built, his four and a half feet of length was armored with a mail of thick, coarse hair that stank to heaven.

In a towsy, misshapen head was a pair of powerful jaws armed with four rows of terrible, dirk-like teeth. His claws were long, dirty white blades, excellent for digging out the tasty lemming and a splendid aid in disemboweling a close-locked adversary. Add to these points a mean and ugly disposition, an insatiable and gluttonous appetite, an indomitable courage, and you get the true appraisal of this murderer of the dark places.

And because those upon whom he preyed were moving south, Lutin very deliberately decided to trek with them. Out of trackless Injun-Devil branch of the Dahadinee, he made his way by easy stages to Beaver River.

And therein lies the tale. . . .

THE full-throated laugh of Rene La Praix lifted loudly over the roar of his white-hot stove, the indescribable din of the blizzard's sweep across the cabin roof. Indeed, why should he not laugh? Here was his own kind of weather, testing the heart of a man, his courage, his skill, his fight. Wild as his own great heart was the storm wind and its shrill whine cheered him, challenged him. . . .

Further, here was early cold—what every voyageur prays for—with a promise of more and better fur. Yes indeed. Here was Rene's Northland in his own kind of mood.

This gigantic voyageur was like that, reading the inevitable challenge in every gesture of the wide North that had bred him. Six-feet-four, two hundred-twenty pounds on the "hoof," Rene was a laughing, fighting, gambling devil. Gambler? Aye, none wilder or more reckless.

Only two years before he had risked his richest pelts on a gruelling two-hundred-fifty-mile dog race against the champion musher of the North. Serum for Fort Francis with two teams running lest one alone should fail. Rene won and in a blizzard that roared off the barrens with the note of death in its grisly howl. And they do say at the Fort that they heard the bellow of his wild *chanson* and the snapping of his moose-gut dog whip above the roar of the wind, a full hour before he mushed in.

That was Rene La Praix.

From the broad Saskatchewan to the Arctic Ocean; from the lodges of the Chipewyans in the bleak land of Little Sticks to the fur cubbies of the Chinooks, his fame had spread. Men knew him as the mightiest sweepsman on the breast of the Great River of the North; as the wickedest rough and tumble fighter in a land of strong battlers; as the luckiest voyageur under the flaming Aurora.

Lucky Rene, they called him. Because he was master of snare and trap-set; because he all but talked the language of the wildlings he lured; because he could cover a trap line in one day that took another man two; because of all these things Rene

made good where others had failed . . . and they called him lucky—this La Praix.

A PALE, snow-dusted dawn inched weakly westward across a frigid, white desolation. Full-fed against a long day on his gruelling west trap line, Rene let himself into the storm, adjusted the tump line across his forehead, shifted his rifle sling and rocked westward on slender, ten-foot skis. He plodded steadily through the gloom of storm-tortured spruces, neither increasing nor decreasing his stride. And he covered miles with a rhythmical ease belied by the swiftness of his pace.

Parka hood pulled low, head bent against the sweep of the gale, he mushed steadily, the long swing of his mittened hands keeping time with the rollicking *chanson* which he flung into the teeth of the storm. . . .

But his song was stilled with the passing hours. His humor, gay at the start, took to itself something of the mean temper of the storm. As he visited them in turn, he found his traps sprung, empty, fouled. And in some there had been prime fur as was attested by bits of hair and bone where some avid carnivore had feasted upon the hapless, befurred victim.

In one trap was a nice cross fox that had been slain by a deep incision into the life vein. Only the blood had been sucked and the brain eaten. The killer, a fierce marten, had not damaged the pelt and it was the full extent of Rene's gather for the day.

The extra labor of repairing destroyed trap placements, cleaning out befouled cubbies, replacing baits stolen by the active woods-thieves, looking to snare and deadfall—all these things slowed up the voyageur, delayed him. So when gloom again shrouded the far-flung timberlands he was far from his objective. Indeed, he was scarcely more than half way from his cabin on the Beaver River to the snug, rounded *barabara,* or dugout cache on the south bank of the Axeblade.

With night came a break in the storm clouds that had held like a pall for many days. In knowledge that he must perforce make an emergency camp, Rene philosophically made the best of a bad matter.

In the depression of one of his ruined trap shelters, he made a fire, warmed himself and munched mechanically upon toasted bannock and dry pemmican. And in a cold silence, painful after the din of the blizzard, he dreamed of the thick steaks of fresh caribou, white pancakes fried in bubbling caribou fat, great pannikins of scalding hot tea—those things he might have been enjoying along with a soft, warm bed at his far-away cache.

II

LUTIN, the glutton, had not dined. That, in itself, was at once a calamity and a coincidence. For of all the wildlings this giant among the weasels is least fitted to endure hunger. Further, he has been so endowed that if any of the others eat, the wolverine eats also.

Though he had ranged far, though his super-nose had perused each vagrant breeze, no taint of a meal had he detected. The reason lay not in his weakness but in his strength—of odor. It was fetid—terrible beyond compare—and an outrage to other wild creatures who didn't exactly smell like a rose themselves.

So when the rancid stench of Lutin was wafted to the nostrils of others of the trekkers, it drove them hence without loss of time, told them plainer than his fierce growl would have done that Lutin the terrible—Lutin the gnome-like killer who races hand in hand with death —was abroad.

The wolverine's luck had been bad. What his nose told him was a caribou "park" turned out to be only the park. The rangy, splay-hoofed denizens had already departed against the rush of flesh-eaters from the north.

Even the rank, musty smell of Spiny, the porcupine, proved to be but one of the peelings where his castineted nibs had dined shortly before. Falling snow had completely erased the track.

A snappy brush with his ill-tempered kinsman—a bulky three foot fisher cat—had proven disappointing. Though Lutin would have gladly dipped his fangs in fisher blood and filled his clamoring belly with the tough stringy flesh, the ordinarily pugnacious fisher declined to "tangle" with the glutton and looped away across the snow at a pace that the shuffling "Injun-Devil" could not hope to match. When at last the wolverine gave up the uneven

chase, his appetite was much improved but his disposition wasn't.

On and on he quested, reading the air for first hints of food. The night was far spent before he scented it.

At the top of a hummock of drift wrinkled snow, his nostrils quivered to the taint of flesh. Sinister eyes flaming, lips trembling hungrily, he bellied down in a stalk, recklessly disregarding the strong threat that all but blotted the meat scent. He moved fast, resembling nothing as much as a fantastic shadow tracery cast through the spruce needles by the cold obloid face of the moon as it peered from between the clouds.

His long claws gripped the snow as he pointed his questioning eyes upwind. Grouse! Sweet willow grouse! Lutin's jaws gaped in delightful anticipation; the hot saliva dripped from his bared, dirk-like fangs. A low growl sounded ahead of him; bones cracked. Again came that raw, acrid threat taint. Bear! A silent warning to all animal kind that the surly forest king was at his dinner.

Did the wolverine take the hint?

Not Lutin.

A HEAVY snarl shook him. Bruin heard and flung back his deep-toned challenge—a coughing roar that stirred the wary grouse to blind flight. The wing-roar of the birds thrilled the hungry Lutin and he slithered down the steep slope, gluttonous, unafraid.

The great brown bear's temper was indescribably bad, his threat loud and continuous at the approach of the wolverine. He half reared as the smaller beast, with deceptive speed, feinted him, darted in, then rolled to the right to avoid the deadly sweep of a massive clawed paw. Again Lutin knifed in; again bruin's clouting bludgeon missed—by a whisker.

The glutton took savage pleasure in baiting his heavier, clumsier adversary, though he was not risking his precious hide merely to indulge his pride. His motive was better conceived, more business-like than that. There was his long empty gut to be considered.

His speed was unbelievable for so squat a beast, his technique perfect, as he avoided a roaring charge of the infuriated bear. Time and again bruin charged, each time coming so close to his murderous desire to encourage him to try again. And each charge took him still farther from his kill. Having thus lured the raging giant to some little distance, Lutin bounded back to the scattered remains of the grouse, bolted them and sped away with his tireless, tumbling waddle that tested the thews of the swifest to match.

Roaring, snarling, complaining, bruin nosed among scattered feathers until it was borne into his inflamed mind that the wolverine had robbed him. Then with the canny calculation of his kind he nosed slowly down the uneven, flat-footed track of Lutin—the rogue.

Far away the wolverine continued questing. The few morsels he had lifted from the bear but accentuated the miserable gripe of an empty paunch. He traveled fast, pausing at last at the top of a queer, round hummock of snow in a flat clearing. He sniffed.

The air was clear yet a faint aroma seemed to emanate from the dome upon which he stood. Into the soft, dry snow he thrust his nose. Ha! A buried feast!

What a spur, that remote scent. With the fury of hungered gluttony he drove into that drift, his long claws throwing back the snow in white clouds. At three feet he struck wood—a log. A strange admixture of enticing odors filtered from below.

WHAT log can keep out a wolverine? Surely not spruce. Lutin fell upon that barrier with his terrible, chisel-like teeth. In a very few moments he had it half chewed in two and in a few more he would have entered the snug cache of Rene La Praix—voyageur.

But in the midst of his labors, Lutin spun around, sat up, ears cocked and nose vibrating. An indefinable something had warned him. Though he now heard nothing, smelled nothing, that suggested danger, he took no chances. He leaped out of his burrow, keen eyes sweeping the broad expanse of open snow on all sides.

Wolverines make mistakes, even as do men, and Lutin made one now. The wind was against him; under the westering moon and the flaming Aurora objects were distorted, blurred. Then he saw them—avalanching shapes, silent, sinister. Wolf

pack! Such was his judgment and into his cold heart crept near fear. For in the open there is no wild creature that does not fear the pack though indeed they may, like Lutin, be more than a match for any lone wolf.

Trapped! That was Lutin's first thought, but the wolverine is last of all a quitter. Coarse, black-brown hair alift, lambent eyes ablaze, voicing blood-curdling snarls, he took the offensive, hurtled into the scudding pack. It was a gesture of super courage inspired perhaps by his near-panic. Fangs flashing, his short legs fairly squirting him into their midst, Lutin slashed his angling way in an immeasurably swift and deadly charge.

Too late he got the hated dog scent, the feared taint of man. Too late he knew this for a dog team. He had already slain. Blood-mad, he slit the throat of the leader with a venomous chop, piled his flesh back upon the others where he broke the neck of another as his terrible jaws chopped and met.

Then he was tangled in a mass of yelping, fouled dogs, dinned at by the hoarse shouts of a man.

It was all over in a moment. Lutin was gone, unscathed. Tonkin, a burly Yellow Knife breed, was offering up lurid curses as he unspanned the shambles that had been his gaunt team of ten huskies.

Thus did Lutin—the rogue—introduce the cache of Rene La Praix to as deadly and treacherous a man as the Northland ever knew.

III

VERY tiny, young and well made, Menant-nee, a Slavi squaw, hunkered down in the snow and unemotionally viewed the wreckage of Tonkin's dog team. Neither in her manner nor yet in her heart was there the slightest excitement. In the last twenty-four hours she had gone through a lifetime of horror and she was dull with a dumb and poignant misery, with an overpowering weariness, with a crushing hopelessness.

They had traveled fast and far—she and the loose-jointed breed. A long day and a longer night they had mushed through a storm that clutched at the breath, that struck at the vitals.

And now dogs and woman were near the breaking point, though the powerful Tonkin appeared as fresh, as tireless, as eager to mush as at the start. There was good reason for his haste. Out of the bowels of the blizzard, he had come to Brady's Cache, a low-built, musty hang-out at the mouth of the Nahanni. He had paid in fur for a jug of the cheap squirrel-whiskey of commerce, had retired to a dark corner not far removed from the red-hot stove and proceeded to drink the whole of it with the surly application characteristic of him.

Then the heart went out of him, his brain turned to ice, the killer-strain of his wild, crossed blood rose up to command him.

Shattering the empty jug, he stood up and without a word proceeded to murder the three men in the room with the cold ruthlessness of E-Wed-See, the cougar. With deadly aim he rocked the lever of his Winchester three times, killing Mike Brady, the proprietor; Windigo Jack, a crazy miner from the Blue Mountains, and a young Slavi buck who worked for Brady at the cache.

In a fever of haste, he robbed the bodies, getting three pokes of flour gold from the sleeping bag of the miner, prodded the fear-crazed squaw of the murdered Slavi into the storm and mushed—from the ire of a redcoat law that he knew would follow as surely as the dawn.

The breed had played with fire in taking the squaw, and he knew it. But she was good to look at. He had been long alone in a hideaway in the far Caribous, and when he tired of her—the only witness of his crime—he would bury her deep in some far tundra. And something of his murderous philosophy must have communicated itself to Me-Nent-Nee and she was very afraid as the killer broke out the sleigh runners, flicked the lead dog with his long caribou-gut whip, and started his snarling mongrels at a mad gallop across ever-deepening snow.

Aside from momentary stops to feed the dogs and snatch a bite of food for themselves, they mushed steadily southward, the tough little dogs snailing along over the hummocky drifts with an icy wind kicking up fantastic whirls of snow dust behind them. Tonkin, silent, tireless,

cruel, soon burned out the alcohol but not the ice from his brain. Strange shapes obsessed him—shapes that loomed in the snow void before him, beckoning, taunting, baring yellowed fangs in malignant sneers.

For a time they angered him, then frightened him. The primitive mind, less robust than the cultured one, reels under such abuse. Tonkin's, perhaps always on the verge, had now cracked. He was crazy and his maniacal laughter rang out at intervals with a blood-freezing clamor.

Me-Nent-Nee was mushing with a maniac and she knew it.

And so it happened that an hour or more before the dawn of another and less stormy day, Lutin—the wolverine—interrupted that faltering trek in a savage charge that slew a pair of dogs, maimed others, and hopelessly snarled the tired and fear-crazed brutes.

Mad Tonkin, suddenly aware of the dogs' need of rest, strode to the hole from which Lutin had so suddenly popped. *What he saw there inflamed him.* While the huskies curled up and slept, while the squaw drowsed beside the sleigh, the breed axed his way into the cache.

AT first view of the interior he was tempted to bring in woman and dogs, build up a fire and eat and rest in comfort. But there was always the chance that the owner might arrive upon the scene or—the redcoats. No, it was unsafe.

So after a thorough search, he appropriated a heavy bundle of fur that swung from the beams, helped himself to a frozen haunch of venison, and withdrew without effort to close the cache against wildling foray.

In a deep copse of timber, not a quarter mile from the cache, Tonkin made a camp where wood was plentiful and the air was still. There a fire was built up and man, woman and dogs warmed themselves and ate their fill. As the dawn came up, woman and huskies slept the sleep of exhaustion but the breed sat up, shoulders hunched, muttering fitfully and at times bellowing angrily at the tortured shapes that formed in his sick brain.

There is a saying in the far North that ice, formed in a man's brain, may only be melted by warm human blood; that when a man goes mad, only the eating of human flesh will restore his sanity. Over and over, Tonkin mulled these grim myths. Throughout all of that day he considered the matter, casting avid glances at the plump body of the little squaw as she slumbered.

Me-Nent-Nee awoke with the chill of evening striking into her stiff and aching limbs. It seemed that she had slept but a few moments and that it was still the dawn. She glanced at Tonkin and her heart leaped with fear.

He sat exactly as he was when she had fallen asleep, yet there was a difference. His eyes! Hot, feverish, crawling as though filled with worms, those orbs were fixing her with a baleful intensity as he reflectively ran the heel of his thumb across the keen blade of his knife.

When he moved it was like a great cat gathering itself to spring. Swiftly he darted around the blaze, reached for the squaw's throat. Me-Nent-Nee choked a scream in her throat, falling backward to *avoid his rush.*

Whap! Out shot her pac-shod feet to his thick chest with all the power of her legs. The blow staggered the killer, drove him back. Snarling, he came in again. Over and over again she stemmed that man tide, with her strength gradually failing, with his undiminished. It could not last. As he bore in upon her with lambent eyes, he suddenly tensed, listened.

From no great distance away came a foreign sound. Deep-toned, fervent curses lifted in the silent stillness, power tones that caused the huskies to writhe, to moan in their sleep.

With a sibilant catching of his breath, Tonkin sheathed his knife, caught up his Winchester and silently melted into the gathering darkness.

IV

FROM a covert at the forest edge, Lutin watched the departure of the dog team from the violated cache. And because his terrible hunger transcended all other emotions in his shaggy breast, and because he knew there was food to be had beneath that log he had gnawed at so industriously, he waddled clumsily to the scene.

Deep growls shook him as he tore the flank from one of the dead dogs that Ton-

kin had cut from the traces, bit out and bolted huge chunks of the bitter, stringy meat. Not finding it to his liking, he nosed again to his task. If he were surprised to find his job finished and the cache open, he did not show it. Luscious smells came from below and—below he dived.

With the gluttonous savagery of his kind, Lutin launched himself into an orgy of destruction. Sacks of flour, beans, corn meal, were ripped open with vicious growls and violent flirtings of his towsy head, the contents scattered far and wide. Of bacon he ate his fill, burying what he did not want in the earth floor of the dugout. A sack of dried and pounded caribou flesh he sampled, then befouled.

A very pleasant and satisfying time was being enjoyed by the glutton when his peace of mind was suddenly shattered by a terrific roar from the entrance.

Lutin crouched, whirled, backed, uttering the most terrible snarls he could conjure up. His angered, beady eyes glared up at the gloating face of bruin, who had patiently followed the spoor of the unruly beast that had defied him at his dinner. The big brown bear took a savage delight now in telling the wolverine what he was going to do to him in the cache.

No beast save bruin would have dared the glutton in the close confinement of the dugout. But the nasty warnings from below were entirely wasted on the bear. Loosing a volley of courage—crushing growls and roars, bruin plunged into the cache and stark hell was of a sudden let loose in the blackness.

Two churlish demons roared, shrieked and bellowed as they grappled in mad combat. Bladed claws seared and tore; white fangs dripped red; heavy bludgeons pounded and bruised. Knifing inside bruin's flying palms, Lutin clamped a fang hold on the tender flank strip, whipped his powerful head, tore the heavy hide and darted away. The forest king bellowed at the stinging pain of a nasty, jagged wound.

Like a thing berserk, the bear launched himself, caught the terrible bundle of lacerating daggers, flailed him with ponderous, synchronized blows—blows that hurt, blows that drove the wind from Lutin's lungs. But not even a bear's claws can penetrate the armor-like hair of the fighting wolverine.

Bruin chopped on a tooth hold but all it gained him was a sickening mouthful of gagging hair that turned his gorge. By now, the cache reeked with the awful musky fetor of the wolverine—a stench that hurt the bear as much as the punishing wounds the little battler was inflicting upon him.

But, like all rough and tumble fights, the balance of power lies with the good big fighter as against the good little fighter. And bruin was good. So in the end, Lutin popped out of that cache like seven devils were hard on his tail. And the way he clawed back snow streaking for the timber, left nothing to the imagination.

LUTIN'S feelings were hurt more than his person. That made him ill humored—more so than usual—and something had to suffer. That something was a lynx. Not a hundred yards from where Tonkin had established his camp, the wolverine caught the scent.

Instantly he brightened. Gone was the dejected droop of head and tail. At an interested waddle he nosed upwind until he stood at the dark opening of a den formed of two down trees, a low snag and a bower of snow-roofed limbs. And in his ears was the gladsome music made by the virulent snarl of that most valiant of the whole cat tribe.

He is a creature of devilish disposition, the lynx, and a steel-thewed swordsman of parts. Strong for his inches as any living carnivore, in a fight for what he deems his he is a passionate and pugnacious gladiator.

Lutin knew these truths from long campaigning and one would think it would have kept him out of that den. Nay. Not Lutin. Dawn was breaking the eastern gloom and he hated daylight only more enthusiastically than he loved a fight.

In he popped. And by that overt act was another war started. That fight was a classic though the advantage in weight, in armament, in armor was all in Lutin's favor. The wolverine went about the grim business with a quiet seriousness that would not be denied and that lynx was done to death with dispatch—if not neatness.

When the cat's snarls were still—the stubborn fool simply refused to be reasonable and take the air—Lutin gorged again, curled up in the lynx's warm nest and fell into the deep sleep of untroubled conscience. Undisturbed, he slept the sweep of the sun across the hazy vault of heaven.

And when again the stars struggled forth and the brilliant streamers of the Aurora flamed in dancing pennons from the Pole, he awoke hungry beyond description. It was time to prowl again.

He finished the lynx this time, ate him with the boorish clamor and nasty manner of a glutton—which he is. Then after fouling the remains that they might not attract others to the den, he flicked his scraggy tail contemptuously, bounded into the frosty open. And although he was full-fed he was drawn instinctively to the broken cache.

One whiff told him the story. Bruin had fed there, fallen asleep and was still slumbering. Sudden hate burned in Lutin, his eyes blazed. Awkward yet capable; fearless yet canny; insolent and destructive, he dived into that hell-hole for another go with his huge and hated adversary. Heavy with gorging and sleep, near sighted in the black gloom, bruin was ill prepared to meet the relentless attack of the stinking terror that so suddenly assaulted him.

Viciously slashing at the bear's jugular, a habit of all the weasel clan, Lutin was whirled against the beams as the startled bear surged erect, bawling with terror and anger. In a wild storm of muscular effort, the lighter beast was whipped like a pendulum by the flailing arms of the bear. Then he lost his hold, was smashed against the side of the dugout and was suddenly alone.

Whipped, bellowing, the great thousand-pound he-bear ploughed out of the cache and pounded for the timber in mad flight.

V

RENE'S trap luck on that first day from Beaver River was no worse than that of the second day, if one discounted the improvement in the weather. Trap robbers had done their work thoroughly and well. And as though to add insult to injury, they lifted a prime silver fox from the last trap in the line, devoured it in the very cubby where it had been caught, tearing the valuable pelt into fragments.

"*Diable,*" muttered the voyageur, gazing ing sadly at this master stroke of vandalism. "Dose trap robbaire she tak' all de bait; she tak' all de pelt. You best watch close, Rene, or she tak' de hide off you' back, by gar!"

And in the good nature of healthy youth, he was chuckling over the thought of the wildings stretching his skin as he rocked swiftly toward his cache for a long-delayed feast. With but a mile to go the light failed and darkness was again upon the snow country. Like the wind he careened down a slope, skilfully steering through tortuous tree aisles, until he shot upon the wide flat where the dome of the roofed dugout reared in lonely isolation.

Banking sharply in a smother of dry snow and with squeal of skis, Rene coasted to the entrance just as a huge, bawling brute cascaded out of the snow at his very feet and roared into the timber. Instantly Rene was more angry than surprised. Instinctively he knew that his cache had been broken into.

Clawing at his rifle sling, he wheeled, threw up the weapon, beading, at the bulky brown bear that jacknifed over the snow.

But a sudden eruption took him off his feet, threw him into the air and set him flat in the drift, rifle and bear forgotten in a moment of stunned surprise. Like a cannon ball, a squat, angered beast knifed out of the cache in pursuit of bruin. Red-eyed with rage, Lutin did not suspect the man's presence, nor yet did he espy him until the unavoidable collision. Man and wolverine cleared the ground and rolled a dozen feet away, a mad tangle of parka, snowshoes and stinking hair. Long before Rene had extricated himself from the mix-up, Lutin was far away with heart pounding furiously with the scent of the greatest killer in his nostrils.

From the mouth of the big voyageur, grinning widely at this mishap, broke such a wealth of invective as to cause the dancing Aurora to burn brighter for the moment. In Assiniboine, in Cree, English, French and patois, he howled to high heaven his opinion of a varmint that would break into a man's cache and then run all over him on the way out.

And within easy earshot the mad Tonkin heard that raucous blasphemy, caught up his rifle and commenced a stealthy stalk of the leather-lunged individual whom, of course, he supposed was following his trail. And as he crept toward the dugout, he breathed over and over his new belief. . . .

". . . man-blood melt de ice in de head! Man-meat feex de seek brain. . . ."

RUEFULLY, Rene built up a fire and viewed the shambles that had once been a snug cache. Had his nose not told him so, the scene would have eloquently shouted—*wolverine.* And so it is likely he would have cleaned up, made repairs and have forgotten the matter had he not suddenly laid eyes upon a chip. A big fat spruce chip stared back at him—one such as only a true woodsman can cleave out. He whistled, looked about for evidence of his bundle of furs. Swift examination brought enlightenment and a great anger, though perhaps his deduction was not entirely accurate.

"By gar!" he raged, beating upon his drum-like chest. "De feller dat tip you over she was carajon, *certainment.* But dose pelt robbaire she walk on two leg, Rene. *Roger-bontemps, hein?* Nice leetle feller, him. I t'ink I play some more wid dat *maudit*—lak dis. . . ."

He snapped the thick chip between thumb and finger as though it were a match. Then came his warning—as things come in the wild North. Nothing definite, yet he whirled, eyes probing the dark opening. In a flash came kaleidoscopic impressions.

A long beardless horse-face bordered by a dirty white-fox parka-hood . . , red eyes smoldering with the fires of the Cain lust . . . the snaky muzzle of a rifle lifting level with a putty-white cheek . . . remorseless curl of hate-filled, malignant lips curled back from yellowed animal fangs.

It was like a dream yet stark reality drove Rene forward in a desperate play for his life. Roaring like a bull, the voyageur ducked, snatched out his fleshing knife and surged at the half-seen apparition. Simultaneously the close air of the cache rocked in concussion, in a roar as of ten thousand cannons. Flame seemed to envelop Rene La Praix, to blot out all things as does a lightning flash. Then he was prone upon the floor, open eyes glaring at his assailant, a madman's avid chuckle dinning his ears. . . .

". . . . man-meat him cure de seek brain! Man-blood him melt de ice in de head."

Though he felt no pain, Rene had a strange buzzing in his head, then the top of his skull seemed to pop off; his mighty power oozed from him in a stream as flour pours from a rent sack. Silent at last he lay prone and limp upon the littered floor of his cache.

VI

TONKIN was bringing home the bacon. With huge hands locked under his victim's armpits, he dragged the unconscious man across the snow like a crude *travois.* And he chuckled at his work. It were far better this way. The Great Spirit had been kind, had sent him this human that he might now cure his sick brain without sacrificing Me-Nent-Nee for whom he had more than a little regard.

His wild laugh lifted eerily as he moistened tongue with the thick blood that welled from a neat, round hole in the voyageur's head. And that crazy laugh was echoed by a far-away sound, so delirious, so demoniac, that it chilled the already cold heart of the mad killer-breed.

He was not so mad that he failed to recognize the meat-cry of *loup-grise,* the terrible Alaskan forest corsair. He knew the sound for the wailing cry of the pack, ravening for meat, a pack that followed his own trail, gray famished shadows streaking in from a famine-bitten Northland.

And the heart of this cold killer shrank beneath the thrust of talons of fear. Dropping the body of Rene La Praix, he sprinted for the fire where Me-Nent-Nee fed the always famished mongrels. In staccato syllables, Tonkin ordered the squaw up. Swiftly he unspanned the dogs, strapped on his webs. In five minutes man and squaw were mushing southward behind the flying huskies at a pace that soon distanced the fierce howl of the ranging carnivores.

FROM the edge of the woods, Lutin, the rogue, heard the wolf call, cocked his short ears to listen. There was a ring

of hate in the many-throated pack cry, a chilling note of challenge, of defiance, of menace. It suddenly bore in upon the conceited self-sufficiency of the wolverine that the voracious blood hunters were hard upon his own trail, that they were uncomfortably close.

And Lutin was nobody's fool.

So with a half laugh and without the slightest suggestion of hurry or of fear, he waddled easily to the tight den from which he had sallied but an hour before. And in passing he stopped for a moment to glare at a dark blot against the white snow—a blot tainted with man, with blood.

There was mystery surrounding the crumpled figure and he was puzzled. But as it was a silent, non-menacing mystery, he grinned soundlessly and—fouled it. And by that repulsive profanation he undoubtedly saved the life of Rene La Praix. An instant later Lutin was in the den, only a few feet away.

With a last mad chorus of baying the gray, pale-eyed wolves debouched into the open, sweeping forward in a wide fan that took in the ruined cache. There they paused, ringed it and nosed out the tales it had to tell them. Then in a silence more menacing than their hellish clamor, they were moving once more along the trail they were following, led by a strapping, black-hackled youngster.

It was a night of early moonrise and as the golden disc, nearly full, cleared the eastern tree line it lit up a silent, questioning pack that ringed a pale-browed, unconscious man. Hungry as they were, the fierce, untamed brutes hung back before the foul scent of the wolverine that hung over the flesh they would have been glad to rend. Lutin's very act of scorn for all that was man was holding them back.

Round the pack the leader waltzed, hackles alift, terrible snarl goading them to the feast. And in one of his scolding circles he passed a bit too close to the dark mouth of the den where Lutin crouched, tense, hate-filled. That at once was his mistake and his doom.

Swiftly, silently, a dark shadow catapulted into that leader wolf, seized him in an iron grip right behind the ears, chopped avidly and cast him aside, a quivering flesh heap. In an instant the reek of his warm blood stung their nostrils and the pack devoured him, hide, hair and bones. Nor did they see the scampering wraith that again took his stance at the den doorway.

Having disposed of their leader, the pack turned its attentions again to the man. Man and wolverine—two hated scents. Courage must be worked up gradually. Slowly the ring drew in, only to leap back again as the man threw an arm weakly across his face, groaned. And as they whimpered nervously and stood back, Lutin struck again. And once more the pack feasted upon their own.

IT was great fun for the glutton and with little danger to him. Should they discover him and attack his stronghold he was more than a match for the pack. So he became more bold, less cautious. Darting out, he seized a third wolf and—caught a tartar.

In an instant there was a furious mix up of paw-stirred snow that lifted over a fight to the death. In a great rush they swarmed all over Lutin with a clamor terrible to hear. Lutin gave back silently. As they bore him down by sheer weight of numbers it looked like another tragedy of the wild with a lone killer bowing to the pack.

But hold! As though from an eruption the pack heaved upward, fell back, dissolved before a gnashing demon of claw and fang and there was Lutin—the indomitable — swarming, whirling, snapping, snarling, watching eagerly for opportunity to regain the haven of the den. But they had him hemmed, cut off, so he did the next best thing.

He backed against the bulky thickness of Rene La Praix—voyageur.

And strange to say Rene felt him lodge there, saw him, smelt him, yet he could do no more than watch the wolverine's splendid lone fight against the raging wolves. His legs seemed to be paralyzed and while he could move his hands and use his voice, he deemed it best to lie still that he not distract the lone beast's attention and thus lose the uneven battle for him.

Gingerly he felt of the wound in his head. There was a clotted hole in his forehead that pained fearfully, a pulpy swelling extending over the crown and

down behind, a torn and bleeding hole at the base of his toque. The ball had apparently been deflected, drilled between scalp and skull and torn out where the head dips into the neck.

Even as he considered the margin by which he had escaped death, Rene knew that as shock left him he would regain use of his legs. Regain it, indeed! Only providing the wolverine held out.

What a chance! In fierce successive rushes they drove Lutin over the body of the man who now added the sweep of a keen blade to the terrible fangs of the glutton. The wolves would have destroyed them both in time. Make no mistake about that. But of a sudden reinforcements arrived.

Black etched against the low hung moon was silhouetted a towering and bizarre shape. Coughing angrily, blowing and pawing at sight of the wolves into which he had unknowingly blundered, a giant bull moose tossed his great palmated antlers, breathing steam through distended, quivering nostrils.

VII

AT sight of the great antlered beast standing there like some prehistoric monster, the heart of Rene La Praix beat gladly.

"Dindon—mon bullee!" he roared with most of his normal vigor. "By gar, dere is Dindon. . . . King of de Nort'."

"W-a-a-f! W-a-a-f!"

There was no voice like Rene's in all the Northland, and the great bull gave answer in hoarse barks that stirred the heart of the sorely hemmed man. And then Dindon came. It was moose snow. In the soft covering where struggling wolves flounder the shovel-horned giants move without effort on their great splay hoofs. And so he came, red-eyed, massive, deadly, at a swift, swinging trot.

In an instant he was among them, eyes blazing green, wicked knife-edged hoofs striking down the gray carnivores, sabre like "wolf-hookers" tossing them, holding them at a distance.

Having tasted about all the fight they craved for one evening, and with the edge having been taken off their terrible hunger, the wolves slunk away with low whines, melted into the darkness. Man and moose were alone.

Warily Dindon muzzled the man with his bulbous, prehensile nose. Scent told him that here indeed was the beloved master who had reared him. All restraint was then laid aside as he lovingly but painfully caressed the injured man.

And Rene? Already his booming laugh was coming back. He was weak but the blood surged into his numb legs in waves of stinging torment. In a battle of an hour's duration against impotence, dizziness and reeling senses, Rene found himself erect at last, leaning upon Dindon for much-needed support. With *babiche* thongs he lashed himself there against his falling should he lose consciousness. Then they were away like the wild wind itself, the voyageur running where he could and when unable, merely clinging to the great ruminant's hump.

Throughout the long night they scudded southward along the moon-revealed trail of a dog team and a pair of snowshoe tracks. Leaning heavily upon Dindon's mighty strength, Rene felt his own pour back, so that at dawn he was able to mush. With the rising sun came sight of the Beaver River cabin and what he found there burned Rene to a greater determination to dog the trail of the man he had recognized as Tonkin. He had often heard tales in the Indian villages anent the man's cold, sly cruelty, yet he marveled now at the boldness of him.

Gone was every pelt that Rene had gathered during the weeks just past, and in addition numbers of small things that soften the ordinarily hard life of the trapper in the far North.

By the code of the North, Tonkin might indeed have entered the cabin, appropriated in accordance to his immediate needs of that which he found there. But no law gave him the right to take a man's fur gather, to walk away with the absent owner's personal effects. Indeed these last crimes ranked no less heinous than the direct murder he had attempted but the evening before.

Sugar and meal for the moose, bannock, fresh caribou steak and hot tea for the man and then they were away again on a hot trail to the south.

WHEN they had covered half the distance from the cabin to the broad Liard, Dindon shied violently, plunged around a dark huddle in the snow. It was Me-Nent-Nee, the Slavi squaw, bruised and bleeding from a terrible beating about the head, worn out and no more than half conscious. Rene wasted valuable minutes to bring her around. As she stirred back to her senses, saw that Tonkin had gone and that a stranger kneeled beside her, Me-Nent-Nee was curious.

"You Redcoat?" she inquired.

"Redcoat!" Rene laughed. "Lak hell! Me, do I look lak p'lice? Rene La Praix, dat's me . . . voyageur. You Tonkin's woman?"

"Ee-e-e-e . . . no! No!" she spat. "Him keel my man."

Rene whistled. "Dat feller dam bad medicine, him. Trap robbaire, assassin, cache t'ief. I t'ink I mak him hard to catch, *hein?*"

Me-Nent-Nee shook her head. "Him heap *demence*—crazy. Him keel. . . ."

"Who . . . dat *maudit?*" Rene cackled. "He gonna be crazier yet, by gar. How you lak see Rene La Praix break dat feller up an' tak him to de Redcoat, hein?"

The squaw shrugged, hopelessly.

"Come on," coaxed the voyageur. "You t'ink you can ride de shouldaire lak *une petite enfant?*" He tapped the base of his brawny neck.

For a moment Me-Nent-Nee hesitated, pondered. Then her eyes lighted and she nodded.

Rene's deep laugh boomed out. *"Bien!"*

He unstrapped her webs, tying them upon his own feet. Then he hoisted her dainty weight to his broad back and they were racing forward again upon Tonkin's trail. Through alternate stretches of barren snow and spruce timber, Dindon led the swift way to a thinly wooded ridge from which white-carpeted opens fall away to the mighty Liard. Far ahead Tonkin mushed toward the river while behind him lay the silent, tuckered dog team.

As Rene rocked up to the abandoned sleigh, he shouted. Tonkin had left his heavy rifle in favor of the fur packs and the dead miner's gold. How he ever expected to cross the Liard with his ill-gotten burden, if indeed he did, is a mystery. Yet toward its frigid flood he was heading, lonely, mad, oblivious of the chase that hummed so close behind him.

But the crossing was something he had no need to worry about. While he was still a half mile from its borders and the voyageur not half that distance behind him, Rene stopped, loosed the moose, sat the squaw down in the snow.

"Keep de eye open," he told her. "Don't go sleep or Rene spank you lak a baby, by gar. I mebbyso kill dat *maudit,* den I got a squaw for witness when de Redcoat she come."

Me-Nent-Nee smiled at him, nodded and motioned him to his task. Leaving the gun with the Slavi, Rene darted after the fierce breed who whirled at the voyageur's challenging bellow.

"Stop, *maudit*—accursed one! Where you t'ink you mush, *hein?* Drop de fur, Tonkin, so Rene can kiss de cheek—wid de sharp knife. What? You not glad to see me, by gar?"

Tonkin's answer was to cast off his packs, rip off his parka and toque. Each action was matched by the oncoming voyageur. As though by formula each man slipped his webs, shot a brawny arm to his *couteau crochet,* the terrible crooked blade of the northern river men.

VIII

VICIOUSLY they met in a smash of hard-driven bodies, ring of fouled steel. Battle of madness! Tonkin mad with brain sickness; Rene mad with the courage that the wild Northland breeds in its own!

Each fought silently, clashed, broke, circled, Tonkin low like a cat, Rene erect with the bold stance of the moose. Lunge, parry, feint and slash! Each found the device to checkmate the other's lethal stroke, yet the blade of each tasted blood—blood that commenced to stain the white purity of the snow.

In all his rollicking northland experience, Rene La Praix had never met a man with greater physical strength than his own. He met him now. In a swift, straining test of strength with knife hilts locked, Tonkin proved the master.

It may have been that the rugged voyageur was still far below normal strength because of his head wound; it

may have been that the maniacal strength of the big breed was too great to be matched by muscles co-ordinating with a normal brain. Certainly Tonkin was far the strongest of the two and his fierce thin lips curled like a wolf preparing to kill.

Rene was unafraid. The breed whom he had held lightly suddenly commanded his interest, his respect. Forced to give ground, faced with the hot, writhing eyes of the Yellow Knife, Rene broke the deadlock with strength born of desperation and by the faintest of margins voided the leaping death stroke of the crazed half blood.

Then with the wind whistling from his laboring lungs, the voyageur was put on the defensive, ducking, dodging, parrying, thrusting, ever backing before the untiring onslaught of this super-demon against whom his strength was as that of a child. And in defeat, Rene knew that only his wits would save him from death at Tonkin's hands.

So as he backed, it was always in the direction of the abandoned sleigh where the breed had left his Winchester.

The canker of bitterness swept Rene's heart as he backed before the relentless attack of the madman. Where was the vaunted courage, the strength, the mastery that had earned him the title—King of the North? Was life become suddenly so sweet that he would save it by guile rather than lose it while fighting the fight of the bold voyageur?

Red anger gripped him.

Roaring from the sting of shame that was in him, Rene dashed aside the half-breed's knife arm, lunged inside with his own keen blade agleam, scintillant with venom. In a mad welter of flying arms, soughing breath, straining legs, the two giants crashed, Rene barking in his wild rush, Tonkin laughing eerily. The voyageur felt the sting of the Yellow Knife's blade, laughed it off, took a stroke to give one. He cried out in uncouth delight as he felt the breed give.

Then their blades were locked again and the fearful strength of the maniac appeared to blanket him, crush him, rob him of his powers.

With a despairing effort of his tiring arm, Rene drove back Tonkin's knife hand, twisting desperately at the same instant to gain the *mousse*—the goat without horns. It was a mad play, a gambler's chance. Should he succeed, not even Tonkin's awful strength could save him from the knife; should he fail, he would be wide open to the madman's fatal thrust.

Teeth gritting, face contorted with the pain of the great demand upon his body, Rene put on the pressure, flipped his wrist in the deadly disarming effort. For a terrible moment both fighters stood like graven statues. Steel rang, rang and snapped. Both blades, shorn of their hilts, slithered into the snow.

A GREAT gladness welled up in the voyageur's heart as he drove into battle with flailing fists. Rough and tumble! Here he was at home. None knew better than he the many tricks that win such battles. But he was figuring without his shorn strength, without the might of his adversary.

They clinched, whirled, struggling for the advantage. Then they were down, rolling over the soft snow in a smother of dust. They came to rest with Tonkin atop the voyageur, his talons hard sunk into his opponent's thick throat.

Vainly Rene tried to rally his spent forces, hammering impotently at the Yellow Knife's body. His blows grew weaker and weaker, bouncing off the rubbery abdomen of the breed without effect. Rene's lungs screamed for air . . . those killing fingers tightened . . . the breed's contorted face, his fetid breath became less real . . . vision faded in a blur or great red and black spots. . . .

Even as his senses waned, Rene heard a muffled report, a rasping imprecation from Tonkin. He felt the man stiffen, then suddenly the golden air was sweeping into tortured lungs and his enemy lay over on him in a dead and silent weight.

Moments later the exhausted voyageur rolled the corpse that had been the mad breed from his heaving chest, sat up and looked about him. And the first thing he saw was Me-Nent-Nee, a smile upon her comely face, Tonkin's smoking rifle across her knees. She sat there like a little gnome, her round sober eyes fixed hungrily upon the face of the giant she had saved.

Rene smiled weakly back at her.

"T'anks, my frien'," he murmured. "You kill dat *maudit,* nice. . . ."

The woman glared at the man she had slain with his own weapon. "Him dam bad," she raged. "Him keel my man!"

The voyageur clambered unsteadily to his feet. *"Diable!"* Every muscle in his hard body shrieked with the agony of the effort. "Dat feller she strong lak de moose . . . she fight lak de wolverine, *oui!* Where de hell she got it all dat strong?"

Me-Nent-Nee tapped her forehead. "Him brain freeze. Great Spirit take him brain an' give him horse-strength in trade."

Rene nodded. Already he was thinking about this woman, the problem she suddenly presented. Miles from a human habitation, a hundred miles from the nearest woman, straight-thinking Rene was hard put to know what to do with his rescuer.

"Where Dindon—my moose?" he asked her as he missed the animal.

"Huh!" Me-Nent-Nee grunted. "Him t'ink I shoot him; him ron away."

The man nervously avoided looking at her as he pulled on his parka. "Hm-m-m," he grunted. "Dat big turkey ron away, *hein?* Dat bad. Me, I gonna catch dat feller before he get away. You tak' de dogs an' mush home. . . ." He retrieved his bundle of fur and returned to her. The little squaw regarded him with gathering brow.

"Home?" she murmured. "How me know where you live, M'sieu?"

And before the significance of her surprising question fully permeated his brain cells, she cried out:

"Hey-yah!"

With stiffened arm she pointed into the Liard bottoms. Behind a heavy sleigh drawn by a splendid team of Hudson's Bay dogs, rocked a tall man who headed his leader directly toward him. And the swing of his trim shoulders, the sweep of his long arms, was a symphony of motion in red—the red that was the law of the Northland.

IX

CORPORAL "SANDY" McNAUGHTON of the Mounted, en route from his lonely Toad Lake Post to Division Headquarters at Fort Liard, was quick to espy alien dots against the flat white of the snow-drenched landscape. To his practiced eye they spelled m-a-n, and what with the storm that had raged without interruption for weeks, that more than likely meant trouble. So with a low order to his dogs, he had turned out of the trail and set out to investigate.

If he was surprised to see the stiffening form of Tonkin asprawl upon the snow, a little squaw hunkered down beside a brawny, bewhiskered voyageur, a loaded sleigh at some little distance with exhausted dogs curled upon their tails, he did not show it. Swiftly he appraised the essentials—this manhunter.

His stern eye took in the gory wound in the dead breed's head, the lurid bruises upon the face of the squaw, the bloody, trampled snow, the dark clots upon Rene's parka where he had bled the evening before. Trouble! It was said of Sandy that he had a hound's nose for trouble and it had not failed him now. Here was but another tragedy of snowland—a matter for the Mounted. And despite the dread seriousness of the Corporal, he was forced to smile at the greeting that the bluff voyageur hurled at him as he drew up the dogs.

"Bo' Jo', M'sieu'!" he bellowed. "De Redcoat she come lak de wolf on de trail of blood, by gar. You come too late, M'sieu' P'lice, to get you' man alive. I jus' kill him . . . me, Rene La Praix, voyageur."

"No! No!" Me-Nent-Nee's shrill disclaimer lifted as she surged to her feet. "I keel heem! Tonkin keel my man. Him crazy; me shoot!"

For an instant the Mountie stood motionless, reading the eyes of the pair before him. Then, without a word, he strode to the dead breed, rolled him over, looked into his cold face, fierce and animal-like even in death, then turned him face down again. Stiffly he motioned Rene and the squaw to sit, rolled a cigaret and squatted beside them.

"Tell me!" he ordered them cryptically.

And Rene La Praix did. In his quaint, expressive patois, face agrin, hands ever on the move, he recited the story—that part of it that he knew. He told of a violated cache; of his near-murder at the hands of the madman, of a grim chase made pos-

sible by Lutin, the rogue, and Dindon, the King Moose. As to his immediate trouble with Tonkin, Rene stuck by his guns, though he was forced to draw heavily upon his imagination to frame the yarn. In his own words. . . .

". . . dis *maudit* she mush lak hell; she kill de dog; she kill de squaw; she kill every dam thing but Dindon, de moose, an' Rene La Praix, voyageur, by gar! Den I tell him to stop, to drop de fur dat he tak' from de cache on the Axeblade, from de cabin on de Beaver Riviere. *Oui,* I tell him to drop dose fur or fight. He say fight. *Eh bien!* So we fight wid de fist. *Nom de Dieu* how we fight till de fist she got tired. Den we tak' de knife. De knife she break, *pouf,* lak dat! Dat leave but de gon, M'sieu. But, *parbleu,* we got but de one gon. We fight for dat gon, *mon ami,* an' in de fight dat gon she go off. Boom! Lak dat. De bullet she kill dat *maudit.* Dat is de end; dat is all. . . ."

"Huh" Me-Nent-Nee snorted derisively. "Dam lie! What for all talk? Tonkin keel my man; now him dead. 'Splenty sure!"

SANDY—a judge of men through years spent in hunting them in the remote corners of the Northland—knew that Rene was lying without the squaw telling him. For his keen eyes had noted that Tonkin had been shot from behind and the packed snow at the scene of the conflict told an entirely different yarn. He read them both as one reads a printed page, and what he gleaned there told him that the squaw had done the breed to death. So he patiently drew out her story, jotting down the important points in his journal.

When she had finished he smiled at them.

"I know you by reputation, La Praix," he said. "And that's good. I'm reporting the affair as you have told it. Tonkin was a bad one and the country will be better off without him. You've saved us a lot of trouble in running him down. When will you be going outside?"

"In de spring," Rene grinned. "To Ishwatam."

"Good!" Sandy rose. "Report to headquarters there when you go down in case the chief might want to quiz you. Where are you bound from here, La Praix?"

"Nort' to de Beaver Riviere, by gar! Back to de trap lines!"

"You bet!" Me-Nent-Nee came to life, grinned. "We goin' back to de Beaver!"

"Hein?" Rene shrieked, backing away from the little Slavi with the hair alift upon his sore head. "What you say? We go? Where de hell you t'ink you goin' on dose Beaver Riviere, eh?"

Me-Nent-Nee shrugged. "You got it no *cabane,* me build you Injun lodge. Or mebbeso we live on de trail, eh? Me heap strong, good woman for voyageur, you bet!"

Rene groaned, turned to the grinning Mountie. "Hoi, M'sieu' P'lice! What de hell I goin' do now, eh? Me—Rene La Praix—I not a squaw man. I got it a wife an' seven hungry *enfants* on de Beaver Riviere! Dose wife he kill dis dam squaw, by gar. You tell her my wife mean . . . fight lak hell wid de Injuns. Dese squaw she better mush—south!"

In his mind he promised the good missioner at Fort Simpson a prime fox fur for cleansing him of these so necessary lies.

Sandy winked at the brow-wrinkled Rene, shook his head at the squaw. "Not this time, Me-Nent-Nee. You'll ride to Fort Liard with me in the sleigh. This big voyageur looks good but really he's terrible; he's bad. He beats his wives. . . ."

The Slavi was all attention. "Dat all right . . . me not care," she grinned. "Good man beat wife lak hell . . . make good woman, you bet!"

". . . and besides," Sandy went on as though he had not been interrupted. "There's many fine voyageurs that come to the Fort without wives, looking for a good woman like you. Big fellows with many dogs and much fur. We'll find you a good man, won't we, Rene?"

"Dam right!" roared the pleased trapper. "We catch you t'ree-four hosband dat can beat hell out of a squaw more better dan Rene, by gar!"

RENE LA PRAIX watched the sleigh fade beyond the white, hummocky horizon with the stoical face of his Assiniboine forebears. When the Mountie, whom he now more than admired, and the little Slavi who had coveted him, had passed

from his view, Rene slung the stiffening form of Tonkin across his shoulder, loaded him upon his own sleigh. Whipping up the snarling, evil-tempered canines, he mushed swiftly into the timber to carry out the last injunction of Corporal McNaughton.

In the chill spruce he erected a rude scaffold, lashed the body of the breed to it with tough babiche against the sweep of howling winter gales. In the spring he would return and bury the remains in the thawing ground after the custom in the far North.

Having accomplished this grisly business, the voyageur dragged stiffly after the lagging brutes, keeping them pointed along the trail that led to his cabin on the Beaver. And early dusk had crept over a still, snow-bound land as they pushed into the clearing and glimpsed the tight dwelling before them.

A hearty "Hoi!" burst from Rene's lips at sight of home, and as the sound reverberated through the deep woodland a squat, ugly form stirred from his prowling at the cabin door, gazed around imperturbably, and waddled unhurriedly across the snow.

In the enveloping dusk Rene recognized the clownish waddle of the wolverine. Instinctively he caught up Tonkin's rifle, then as swiftly laid it down as though it had scorched him. For the first time in hours he smiled, forgot his painful wounds, his weakness, his punishing weariness, as he followed the progress of the glutton.

In his mind was a picture of the little beast standing against a mad and ravening pack, at bay over the body of a stricken and helpless man.

Nor did he speak until the ungainly creature had reached the timber and disappeared into its deep and tragic silences. Then his booming, cheery voice followed the animal:

"Bo'soir, Carcajou" he shouted. "Good hunting, by gar You rob de trap, steal de fur, some time, *oui.* Dat is bad. But how many pelt it tak to pay for one voyageur's life, *hein?* . . . How many, I ask you, M'sieu' Lutin? *Adieu, mon ami, bonne chance.* . . . Goo' bye, my frien', goo' luck. . . ."

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Yellowknife Justice

By DEREK WEST

Korth was head shamn of the Barren Lands, great white chief of the Yellowknives. Yet a land-ocean of burning ice—a thousand wild muskets couldn't defend him against the long, slender reach of Red Coat Law.

PEHAY'S breath came in panting gasps. His moccasined feet crashed through the dwarf willow bushes. They carried him in flying leaps along the ridge crest above the Great Slave Lake's glinting waters.

There was a momentary flash when the Indian's fumbling fingers found his beaded knife sheath and the blade came to light. A yell from the man behind answered the threat.

Martin Korth's knife was out too. As well he was a white man and possessed of more stamina and determination than the

flying Indian. The rock ridges were rolling down to the lake under their racing feet. Noting it, Korth's eyes gleamed. Pehay was trapped!

In that same moment realization of defeat stabbed the Indian's slow mind. With a courage born of despair he wheeled about; yellow teeth bared, legs planted widely, the knife hand behind him.

Korth's jeering laugh echoed out over the red rocks when the knife flashed past him. A split-second later he was on top of the native, one hand twisted in the man's capote, the blade pricking his pulsing neck.

There was little to choose between the two writhing figures. Only their faces differed. Pehay's was the high-cheeked, coppered visage of the northern Indian. Korth's a narrow face, lit with two cunning eyes of bland brown. Each man was thick-set, short and dressed alike in capotes, baggy trousers fastened about the waist by long voyageur scarfs; each wore the inevitable beaded moccasins.

"You yalla skunk"; came from Korth's wheezing lungs. "Got no more sand than a fish. By Jupiter you're more frightened of Sergeant McTurk than you are of havin' me bump you off. Beats all!" He rolled the Indian's head back and forth on the rocks, adding, "You goin' to do it or not, eh?"

"Mewassin! Mewassin!" Pehay's trembling tones came at length. "You are master. Behold, I too hate these accursed Redcoats. Let there be no blood and I will do your bidding."

"You have spoken well," the trader agreed finally, the tigerish muscles under his ill-fitting garments sending the man to his feet with an effortless movement. "I will make a fool of this interfering sergeant and do as I have said. And you will do your part or your squaw will soon seek another man! I have spoken. Go!"

The trader watched the Indian pick up his knife and pad off in the direction of the Mounted Police post, then trotted back across the rocks to where three Indians awaited him in a birch-bark canoe. Korth barked a sharp order in Cree and the paddles dipped.

PEHAY reached the white-walled police cabin and soft-stepped into the post without knocking. He felt about in the pocket of his capote, produced a rumpled envelope, and handed it across to the Mounted Police sergeant.

McTurk grunted, laid aside his comforting trombone, and slit the envelope with a thick finger. Then he grunted again. The missive was a strange one. It read:

Artillery Lake.

Alec McTurk. To hell with you and all your friends in Jerusalem. I'll trap wherever I have a mind to and no tin soldier in a red coat is going to stop me neither. You and your Great White King can go and jump in the lake if you feel like it. Play that on you pet cow, and see how you like it. I have a rifle and I know how to use it. Hoping this finds you as it leaves me at present.

MARTIN KORTH

"Well, well," McTurk mused half-aloud in soft Scottish accents, as his mind reverted to the warnings sent out by the Mounted Police. "Trouble, I'm thinking. It'll be a job to keep those trappers off the musk-ox reserve."

Korth's studied insult regarding his favorite instrument was a matter for thought. McTurk had forgotten the messenger. He picked up the trombone again and blew into it softly.

Aptly named the "Red Man" by the Barren Land Indians by reason of his reputation and color, Alexander Rondalshay McTurk was still on the sunny side of twenty-five. His traditional lack of speech and grim determination, though, made him seem far older.

The frigid blasts of five winters and an equal number of torrid summers in the far north had left their marks on the sergeant. The broad, leathery face of the thick-set man was a deep red under its tan and matched by a flaming scarlet thatch. A light-lipped mouth was belied by a humorous twinkle in his blue eyes.

Down on the beach Constable Bourbonnai Calmar, who was fishing, broke the willow pole across his kness, and threw it into the water. He cursed fluently in both French and English when the trombone's notes stung his ears.

The constable brought his limber body erect and glowered up at the police building. "Bah!" he said to himself. "What is it? Peegs under a gate! Feefty peegs! *Sacre!* Oh, all right." In response to McTurk's hail he waved a curt hand and started up the rocks.

"Here's Pehay from Artillery Lake," the sergeant introduced the messenger to the constable, when the latter shoved into the cabin's darkened interior. "He says Korth is raising the devil generally with the Indians; chasing them away from their summer fishing grounds, busting up canoes, and shooting the dogs."

Calmar nodded, waiting. The half-breed grinned, shuffling from one moccasin to another. His shifty eyes took in the racked rifles on the wall, the folded scarlet tunics above the two bunks, and the strange thing with which the Red Man's hands toyed.

"Tasowa! Tasowa neyaynake!" McTurk stiffened and came erect in his chair all at once, shooting the Cree words at the half-breed. Gone from the sergeant was the posture of easy familiarity. There was that in his face that told Calmar there would be swift paddling to come.

"A bad talk," McTurk rumbled when he had questioned and cross-questioned the shifty-eyed Pehay. "Here's Korth boasting that no man in the police can take him. You know the natives and how they'll fall for a pow-wow like that, eh? Load the canoe."

WHINING Indians greeted McTurk and Calmar when they finally crossed La Longue Portage and reached the first native settlements on Artillery Lake.

From where they stood the lake stretched out funnel-shaped before them, rimmed by the Barrens' rolling rock ridges. Flocks of geese preened their feathers out on the glinting water, while overhead the inland gulls piped and wheeled.

McTurk's eyes saw none of these things. His gaze was on a thin eddy of smoke arising from Korth's cabin, set in a clump of spruce trees, several miles down the lake.

"All right," the sergeant said to his comrade at length, waving the gabbling Indians aside. "We'll have our dinner now, and then we'll go after the lad down there."

McTurk was lying on his back, pipe in mouth, and gazing reflectively at the blue sky overhead, when the sound of passing moccasins brought his head up. A deer-skin-clad figure trotted by the Mounties' camp, launched a birchbark canoe and a moment later was speeding down the lake.

The sergeant's eyes obtained a half glimpse of the averted face, but it was sufficient. It was Pehay; the man who had brought the letter to the post and who was now hastening in the direction of Korth's cabin.

"Hmm," the Mountie grunted to himself. For a moment he continued to stare at the 'breed, then lay back again, making no further movement until Calmar announced that the canoe was loaded. They embarked in silence and paddled in the direction taken by the native.

The canoe's bow was run up on a narrow sand strip, was pulled ashore and hidden in the willow bushes. A few minutes later the two Mounties were padding softly through the timber.

The humorous twinkle in McTurk's eyes had been replaced by a glitter. Calmar swore softly to himself as he panted along at the sergeant's heels, vaulting over windfalls, dodging through thickets of stinging willows and leaping across creeks.

They crossed the point and came to a little clearing on the lake shore, where Korth's trapping was set up. Blue smoke curled up from a baked mud chimney, several birchbarks were pulled up on the beach, but otherwise there was no sign of life.

"Well, well," McTurk breathed in Calmar's ear. "A frontal attack is the only medicine. No cover. We'll make a run for it. There's a hollow ahead, directly in line with cabin. See it? Off!"

The khaki-tunicked figures burst from the woods, and bent forward, ran swiftly toward the depression the sergeant had pointed out.

Two rifle shots fired almost together sent bullets whining over McTurk's head. He was flat on the moss before the second shot echoed out. The wilderness had taught him the benefit of a quick flop. The sergeant heard Calmar's long frame thud to the ground a second later and smiled grimly in appreciation of the other's speed.

"Where's that lobster-faced Scotch mush eater?" a thin voice howled from the cabin. "Thinks that cow croaking of his is music! Blah-blah-blah! The harmonica has the world beat for sweetness. Call me a liar, McTurk! Call me a liar an' then stand up an' fight like a man!"

WITH the words Korth's slim body appeared in the low doorway. The trader swung the black shape of a Win-

chester above his head, then steadied himself, thrusting the weapon forward.

"He's a great little conversationalist," McTurk said to himself, gaze ranging the trapper. His eyes took in Korth's tousled head, narrow face, and the dirty deerskins clothing the man.

"I tell you I'll stand no more of it," Korth's wild bellow rang out again. "Turning singing rabbits loose in the woods ain't fair. No, an' they're hangin' bells on the trees too. The Mounted Police? Bah! Try it, that's all! I'll shoot fifty different kind of holes—"

McTurk twisted his head toward the constable as four or five more shots whined overhead. "Daft," the sergeant muttered. "Another man driven crazy by the wilderness. It's a wicked country."

The sergeant cautiously elevated his head to see Korth working furiously at the rifle; clicking the lever up and down in a fruitless effort to reload the weapon from an empty magazine.

More clicks as the sergeant came to his feet and raced across the clearing. Korth saw him coming, laughed wildly and, swinging the now useless Winchester over his shoulder, ran to meet the Mountie.

Calmar, panting several yards behind his superior, saw a number of things happen with lightning-like rapidity. Korth braced himself and sent out a desperate swing at the sergeant. But McTurk was not there! He had taken a neat dive, and with his arms wrapped about the other man's legs the Mountie and the trader hit the moss together.

McTurk was well aware of Korth's reputation for agility, but now as they threshed about on the ground he was surprised at the trader's eel-like movements. Korth slipped, twisted and writhed in such a way that the sergeant could hardly maintain his hold.

Several times McTurk managed to grip the little man with one hand, but his fist only crashed into the soft ground as Korth slipped away again. The trader made no attempt to fight back, but laughed wildly as he tossed this way and that.

Finally in desperation the Mountie spread-eagled himself over the trader, and lay there holding him down until he felt the constable tugging at his belt and heard the handcuffs click.

"All right, all right, you pussy-footing tootler" Korth howled, twisting himself over. "You'll hear from Buckingham Palace about this! Sure's a nice way to treat the Duke of Cucumber, eh?"

Then coherence went from the man. He twisted and writhed once more, tearing at his manacled hands; filling the open space between the spruce trees with horrible oaths, childish babbling, and strange phrases that sent Calmar into fits of laughter.

"He's bad," McTurk grunted when at *length the trader ceased contorting him*self and lay stretched on the ground, mouth frothing, face muscles twitching, eyes glazed.

"The winter madness?" Calmar suggested.

"Mebbe," the sergeant agreed. "Anyhow he's insane. You know what that means, Frenchie? We've got to send him away to Edmonton to the lunatic asylum. Well, well. Paddle the canoe around the point and we'll load him into it as soon as we check over his various goods and seal up the cabin, hmm.

BY the time the Mounties had portaged over to Great Slave Lake, Calmar was nearing collapse, although the whipcord sergeant appeared as fresh as when he had started out.

It had been an unpleasant experience. The trader fought most of the way and had endeavored to upset the canoe several times. But finally he had quieted down and in order to let the man in some measure protect himself against the hords of flies the sergeant freed him of the handcuffs.

The moccasin telegraph had carried word of their coming and when the police canoe approached the little bay on which the post was set the rocks were thronged with Indians, staring mutely at the Mounties and their prisoner.

"Out you get!" McTurk ordered Korth. The trader obeyed with alacrity but his feet had no sooner touched the shingle than a great guffaw of laughter went up from the watching Yellow-knives.

Korth picked up a piece of driftwood from the beach and with it in his hands danced back and forth, bellowing and groaning. He slid his hands up and down

the stick in an excellent imitation of McTurk's trombone.

The sergeant's face went pale under its red-brown tan. For a moment he lost control of his wonted calm, and his moccasins thugged on Korth's person as the Mountie kicked and shoved the prisoner up through the yowling Indians.

Halfway to the post the sergeant came to a halt again when Calmar's hand fastened on his arm. Without words the constable pointed to a high-cheeked face peering out from the Indians' ranks.

The face belonged to the 'breed, Pehay, and McTurk was just in time to catch an unmistakable wink pass from the man to Korth. The sergeant's eyelids narrowed, but he gave no other indication that he was disturbed. He continued to shove Korth ahead of him, saying nothing until the door of the detachment building banged on his heels.

"You go ahead and shoot some bacon into the pan," McTurk ordered, throwing off his tunic. "Watch Korth while you're at it too. Saw wood smoke on the horizon when we were coming up from the beach. Steamer will be here in an hour or so. I've got to make out one of those cursed reports for you to take into headquarters along with the lunatic."

Korth squatted himself on one of the bunks, and quieter now, watched the two men; Calmar at the stove and McTurk painfully picking out the letters on his battered old typewriter.

Finally the report was finished in the regulation triplicate, the meal eaten, and then the three men left the cabin to find that the "Gray Goose" was puffing into the bay's entrance.

The sight seemed to excite the prisoner. He again gave his trombone exhibition to the great delight of the Indians, while he filled the hot air with his hoots and groans.

McTurk took no apparent notice of the lunatic's actions. With one hand on his shoulder he shoved Korth through the press of natives; then stood silently on the rocks until the white-sided steamer panted up and two half-breed deckhands leaped off with the shore lines. The gang plank followed. Still pushing Korth ahead of him the sergeant reached the deck to be greeted by the bulky Captain Donelan.

"Howdy, Cap," the sergeant greeted the beetle-browed old sailor. "Two passengers going out; Constable Calmar and a prisoner."

"Eh?" Donelan boomed. "What's this? Martin Korth a prisoner?"

"Huh-huh," McTurk grunted. "He's a lunatic. Getting a trip at the government's expense. Glad to see him go. Bad actor, Cap. Remember when I had to confiscate all those furs he took on the musk-ox reserve? He's had it in for me ever since. But of course that does not cut any ice now that he is insane."

The captain of the "Gray Goose" scratched his head in mute astonishment at the sergeant's explanation. To him it seemed that there was more than one lunatic on the steamer. McTurk took no notice of the stare and went on with his calm explanation:

"You remember those two Helmar boys over at Fort Providence? Suppose to be mad, got a free trip out, but when they arrived in Edmonton the police doctor said there wasn't a thing wrong with them and turned them loose. Cost the government about 500 each and the Mounted Police sure got the laugh for sending them out. Well—"

A quick shuffle of moccasins from behind him brought McTurk's head about. He saw Calmar's hand dart out and return empty. Korth was half way down the gangplank, leaping shoreward.

WITH a grunt the sergeant elbowed the nearer men aside, grasped the end of the gangplank and twisted it over. A splash answered as Korth was sent sprawling into the shallow water. A moment later a second splash sounded as McTurk leaped overboard.

The Mountie landed within six feet of the lunatic and lunged at him. But Korth did not wait. Throwing cascades of white water he plunged up the beach with McTurk at his heels.

The trader dodged like a snowshoe rabbit, in and out between the pop-eyed Indians, doubling and twisting. But wings had been added to McTurk's less limber legs. He well knew that on this scramble depended his reputation in the North; his career as well if some busy-body reported the matter to headquarters.

The two disappeared over the ridgecrest.

A quick glance over his shoulder told the trader that McTurk was gaining. He made a sudden decision, whipped out a long bladed hunting knife from inside his shirt and wheeled about, face venomous.

McTurk's brain was equally alert. Hardly pausing in his stride the sergeant reached down and picked up one of the rounded glacial stones littering the rock pockets. It flew straight and true and Korth's knife clattered on the rocks. Then the two men were at grips.

Cold fury, long suppressed, bubbled through the sergeant's veins. He paid no heed to Korth's fingers clawing at his neck, sending in one crashing blow after another. The trader wilted under that savage attack and when the first of the following Indians topped the rise they met the two returning.

McTurk was striding ahead, one hand fastened in the collar of Korth's mackinaw shirt. He tugged the trader along; evidencing his contempt by not giving the prisoner a single backward glance. Now no laughs came from the staring Yellowknives.

The sergeant reached the gangplank, pushed Korth along, waiting at the foot of the plank until he saw Calmar pull the trader's hands out and manacle them.

"In the name of all that's holy, what is it?" Donelan bellowed down to the man on the beach.

"Korth was giving me the big laugh, but it didn't work!" McTurk called back. "Working the same gadget as those Fort Providence boys. Free trip, make a fool of the police and all that. Had the Indians all primed up to the joke so that I'd never be able to handle them again. He's no madder than you are. Well, he's going out, but not where he expected; jail."

"Good luck, Frenchie; have a good time!" the sergeant sang out, when the captain turned away, waving his hands in dismissal.

Calmar's wide grin answered him as a lane of water commenced to show between ship and shore.

"Here! Apiak and Mosu!" the sergeant barked suddenly at two of the nearer Indians. "Get Pehay and bring him up to the post. I need a good husky prisoner to chop firewood. *Awas!*"

Clucks of assent answered as the men hastily trotted off to obey the order. McTurk wheeled about and with the Yellowknives sidestepping out of his path strode up toward the post building. He was whistling.

"Hoi! A very strong man!" one of the old squaws hissed, watching the sergeant's disappearing figure.

"Huh-huh. Very strong," another woman replied. "Now behold he goes to make the strange music. There is no understanding the Redcoat. *Namoya!*"

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, OF NORTH WEST ROMANCES, PUBLISHED QUARTERLY AT NEW YORK, N. Y., FOR OCTOBER 1, 1937.

State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. T. Scott, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the North West Romances, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, magaging editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Glen-Kel Pub. Co., Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City.

2. That the owners are: Glen-Kel Pub. Co., Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; J. W. Glenister, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

T. T. SCOTT.
(Signature of Business Manager.)

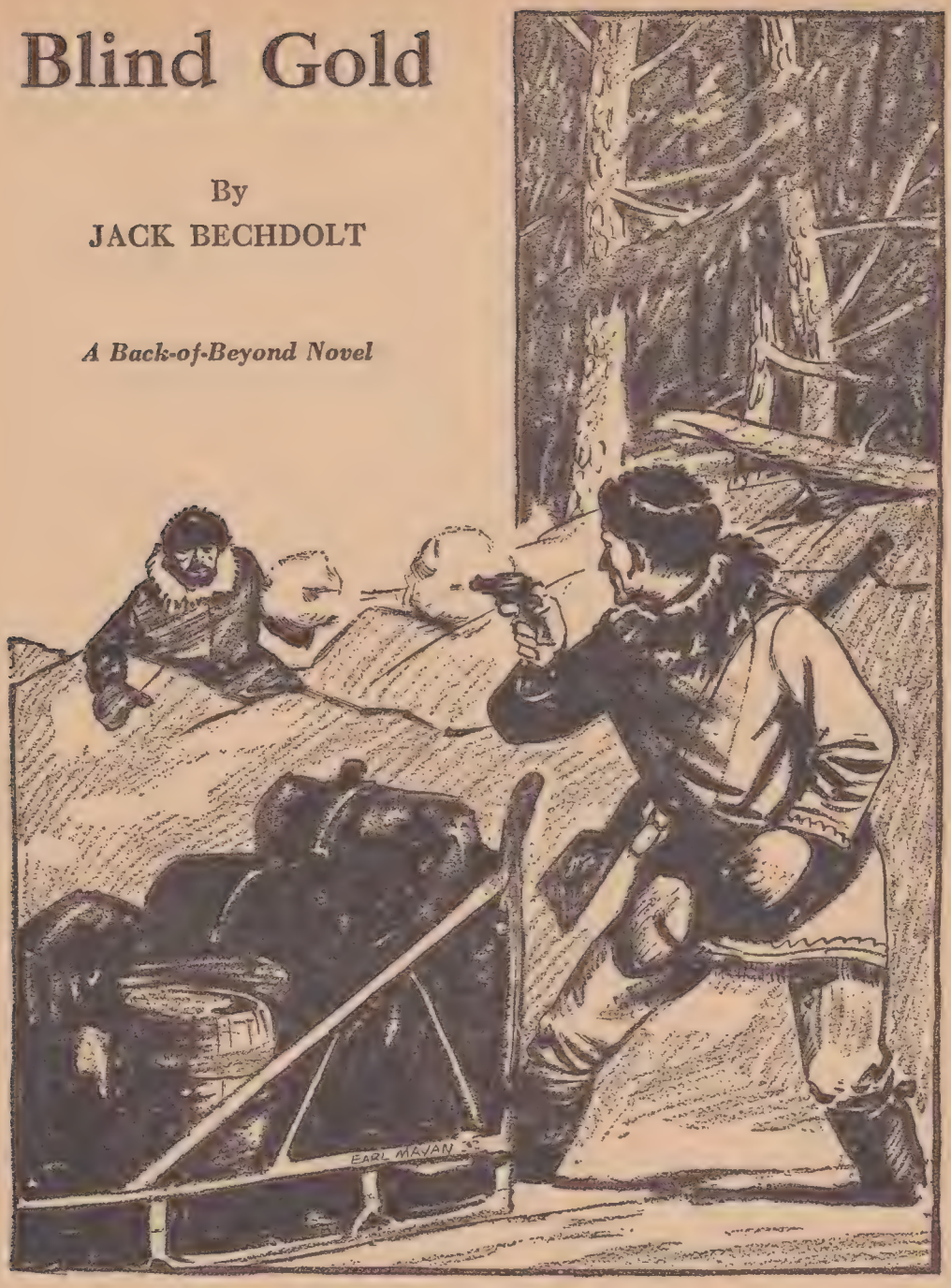
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1937.

[SEAL] (Signed) GEORGE G. SCHWENKE.
(My commission expires March 30, 1938.)

Blind Gold

By
JACK BECHDOLT

A Back-of-Beyond Novel



Men die for gold. Go mad. Turn wolf. Henderson, fool chechako, struggled and froze and fought his heart out for the grim metal. Then, with a yellow fortune and the woman he loved in his grasp, let it all slip through ice-pinched paws.

THE man behind the plunging dog-team staggered erratically. One hand clung in desperation to the gee-pole of his sixteen-foot trail sled. His other arm was up-flung to shield his face from the cold and the flaming brilliance of the world.

The world swam in light. It rose in restless waves. It poured from the winter sun onto the vast, white expanse of the Yukon valley from whence it beat back off miles of crusted snow whose surface was like twinkling diamonds.

The sharp, clear air of forty-below zero swam with light. And light rose like an engulfing tide until the whole world blazed and mortal eyes could bear no more of it. Every contour and wind ripple of the mirror-like drifts was edged with rainbow refractions. The air danced and shimmered. It was torture to look upon and if the beholder closed his eyes the light could be felt still, pulsing without cessation until the brain reeled from jumping nerves.

Before the freight-packed sled, seven dogs of assorted breeds and sizes plodded in the traces. At their head, leading, was an eighth who stood out in the picture.

A gray and powerful creature, he trotted with pointed ears alert, his sharp muzzle questioning the white, blazing desolation. His was the gait of the wolf and the look and bearing of the wolf and in his veins was that mixture of wolf and domestic dog that is the Mackenzie River husky—heavy, powerful, wise and best all-around of the northern sled breeds.

Wolf was king by right of might. The seven who trotted in the traces were his subjects, dependent upon his guiding and his wisdom. As king, Wolf knew no law except the unwavering law of the man. Now the man was helpless and Wolf ruled in his stead.

When the man faltered, as he did repeatedly, Wolf slackened his pull. Sometimes he halted his team. When the man stumbled to his knees or fell on his face Wolf knew and waited. This had been going on for hours, through the gray dawn, growing worse with the coming of the winter sun, approaching its crisis when the suns rays were at their full.

Eventually, no matter how he faltered or fell, the man would rise again and speak the law. Wolf knew that. His shrewd, yellow wolf-eyes twinkled with the assurance; his grinning, red, wolf jaws, frosted with frozen slaver, repeated the assurance to the more docile and inferior animals who obeyed his will.

The man spoke the law in a voice that grew fainter, more weirdly cracked and more incoherent as the torturing hours dragged by. Sometimes it was scarcely a mutter that passed his lips. But it was still the law, a law that Wolf lived by. And Wolf saw that the law was obeyed.

Wolf, the wise, knew that on him and the man the safety of these others depended. Let them once fail and they all failed and the white death would claim them where they lay in a wide empty, cruel world of blazing light and crusted snow.

THE sled topped a rise. It pitched forward down a steep decline. The dogs quickened their pace to keep ahead of it. Sled and dogs went rapidly down the crust. Then the loaded vehicle fell upon them and all went down in a tangle.

In a second the air was filled with fury. Harness was in a tangle as dogs leaped at each others' throats. Gray and mottled bodies shot up out of the heap, dropped into it again, fangs flashing, slaver flying from dripping jaws, the flying snow making a white, glittering steam of frost particles that shrouded the scene.

Into the mêlée Wolf sprang. The flying impetus of his sixty-five pounds flattened out one animal, sent another rolling. His fangs fastened on the haunch of a third. The yelps increased, became screams of agony.

Then comparative quiet reigned, a quiet broken by whimpers and by the snarl of Wolf. A straggling order grew out of the chaos. Dogs rose and tugged against the traces. Wolf sprang out ahead and the sled moved.

There had been no word of law from the man, but the sled moved. One dog was dragging, with harness snarled, but it moved. The strange procession went on and quickened its pace until the lead dog halted suddenly.

The sled was light. The man who spoke the law was gone. Wolf's pointed ears quivered with understanding; his yellow eyes glanced back and saw the state of affairs. He leaped out ahead and swerved the team. The heavy sled came around behind them. The straggling outfit went back up the rise to where the man lay prone.

Wolf, the wise, nosed at him and recognized their mutual peril. He lay still and dead. The husky nipped at the parka-clad shoulder, tugging at the cloth until the burden rolled face upward.

He sprang upon the man's chest and the long, red tongue licked furiously at the still, cold face. His claws tore at the man's breast.

Responding to this rough massage, the

man stirred. He flung his arm about. Wolf licked again until the lips moved and a mutter came from them. The lead dog sat back upon his haunches and let his tongue loll out while his yellow eyes twinkled.

The man moved his legs, rose uncertainly to his knees and felt about him with his hands. Wolf yelped.

Slowly, with many stumbles and hampered by an uncouth clumsiness, the man felt his way slowly along harness and sled.

He toppled at last across the load of freight and his mittened hands fastened in the lashings and clung there.

Lying thus he raised his head until it rocked uncertainly about the horizon. His lips opened and a cracked voice croaked:

"Wolf! Mush, Wolf! Mush! Hi, hi! Mush on, mush! Mush, you malemutes!"

Wolf sprang out ahead. The eight-dog team set shoulders in the traces and strained. The sled moved on again and the man lying prone upon it turned his strained, questioning face before, behind, all about him and saw nothing at all.

The man was blind.

II

THE blazing sun had gone at last. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon and the long twilight lingered over a still world growing more bitterly cold every minute.

A girl paused at the door of a log cabin that snuggled against the high bank of a small creek. She had been out to feed the dogs their daily ration of dried salmon. The unusual excitement among them caused her to linger, forgetful of the risk to bare flesh when the mercury reads sixty below.

She was a small and sturdy looking girl, wearing a man's parka of drill and a man's overalls and *mukluks*. What showed of her face under the parka hood was as utterly feminine in its delicate beauty as the clothes were masculine.

The eyes of brown had a saucy slant because of high cheekbones. They gave the face an elfin look. The brown eyes were puzzling over the behavior of the dogs at this moment and a pretty mouth was pursed. A wisp of soft brown hair blew from under the hood and curled prettily where it touched her cheek.

Except where a path had been cleared to the door, the cabin was buried almost to its eaves in drifts. Smoke from its chimney rose in a straight column. A light glimmered dimly through windows contrived by setting empty bottles in a row and plastering them in with clay.

The cabin stood near the sharp bend of a creek and below the draw widened out. Over the rim of its left bank the girl caught sight of a slow moving procession, dogs and a sled silhouetted against the blue-gray drifts.

The girl's thin, arched eyebrows met in a puzzled frown. She glanced uncertainly at the cabin and about her.

She said as one who solves a problem, "So that's it! Our dogs must have caught the scent of that outfit."

She moved closer to the cabin as she said it, was about to go in. She was uncertain and alarmed and her movements showed it, for eventually she remained watching, but as if ready for instant flight.

The sled came down the bank and swung up the creek, coming toward the cabin. The dogs increased their speed. The watcher was puzzled because no man was running with them.

She spoke aloud again, "I might as well meet them. They must have seen our place by now!"

She started down toward the travelers as she said it.

The approaching sled veered to meet her. A whining, tremulous yelping rose and the big, gray lead dog with wolf ears and wolf gait lurched against his collar. As it neared her, the sled stopped. Eight sled dogs stood panting, their leader lolling his tongue and watching her with shrewd, yellow eyes. And then she saw that there was a man with the sled and that he lay prone across its load, his mittened hands fast about the lashings.

She hurried forward. The solitary passenger stirred and lifted a face with blind eyes, a face that swayed uncertainly while his cracked voice whispered the law to his dogs:

"Mush! Mush on. Mush, you malemutes!"

TWO hours after the advent of the strange outfit the cabin door opened to admit a man past sixty. He was small,

frost-bitten and white-bearded. He came in bustling and alarmed.

His first words were, "Whose dogs and outfit is that?" The question ended in a long drawn, "Glory hallelujah!"

He stared at the red-haired stranger. The girl had rolled him in blankets and dragged him into a bunk.

She turned to him, half apologetic, all explanatory.

"It isn't any of our outfit, Dad. I don't know who he is—"

"Glory!"

"He's in a bad fix, Dad. One foot's frozen, but I think it will come around all right. He's blind, snow-blind. He must have suffered tortures."

The brown eyes softened and misted over as she said it.

"Glory hallelujah!"

The bearded man stared down on their guest. His weather-worn, wrinkled face was a study in perplexity and indecision.

"I just had to take him in," the girl was explaining again. "His outfit must have wandered all day. That big, gray lead dog brought him to me. If I had turned them away they would all have died. I know it's awkward having them, but . . ."

"Awkward! Glory hallelujah, girl—" The bearded man broke off to stare at her from scared, anxious little blue eyes.

"But I couldn't let them die!" she cried to him.

Her father shook his head over it.

"No, that's so, too. You couldn't let 'em die. I guess we're white folks, after all. We couldn't do a dirty trick like that!"

JACK HENDERSON knew he was in a cabin that night. His blindness persisted. The snow-tortured eyes could not tell night from day, but some of the pain had abated. And he knew that he was safe and cared for.

He had been thawed, warmed and fed. He had been reassured about his dogs and freight. He felt himself able to sit up at last and ask questions of the warm and friendly darkness and the two voices that peopled it.

There was a man and a woman in the cabin, he knew. That the man was old he also knew by the rusty and weary quality of his speech. Also because the girl had called him "Dad" and he had heard the man call her "Daughter."

The girl, Jack Henderson decided, was young. But why he should have decided also that she was beautiful he could not explain to himself. Yet he had decided that; would have sworn to it. She was young and lovely and he was eager to hear her speak again, though she persisted in telling him nothing.

That was the oddest part of it all. Neither man nor girl would answer even the simplest questions!

"Where am I?" That was one of the first things he had asked.

"You're in good hands, stranger," the man said.

"You're safe. Drink this and sleep a little," the girl said.

"Sure, but listen, what place is this? I wandered off the Ransom-Circle trail, didn't I?"

The man chuckled.

"You most certainly did, partner!"

"Well, where'd I get to? I'd like to know. Also I'd enjoy knowing who it is I'm indebted to for saving my life."

There was a silence at this, an embarrassed silence, Jack felt. The man spoke after some uneasy rustling and a whisper or two that he did not catch.

"Friend, you're safe enough. Knowing where you are or who we are ain't going to help you none."

They didn't want him to know. He was somewhere and he was in good hands, but where he was and in whose hands they would not tell him. Here was food for thought. And wonder!

"But suppose you tell us who you are," the man went on and his voice sounded stern and sharp. "You're a pretty long way off the trail. How'd that happen?"

Jack Henderson's grin grew somewhat impudent.

"Suppose I don't choose to tell? Two can play at your game."

THE older man's voice grew harder. It held a menacing, icy quality that made chills chase up and down Henderson's spine.

"Young fellow, you take my advice and answer questions."

He sounded almost as if he had covered Henderson with a weapon; the girl's

quick cry, "Dad! he's helpless—and our guest," was not too reassuring.

Henderson answered in a hurry.

"I'm driving dogs for Louis Eadie, the freighter. Between Ransom and Circle. My eyes have always been bad. Two days ago the glare got to them. I thought I could bull my way on in spite of them and went blind."

"I've heard of Louis Eadie," the old man said slowly. "I've heard a lot. But it strikes me you wandered a powerful long way off that trail."

Henderson shrugged.

"That's how it happened, Mister."

The girl said with dignity, "He tells a straight story. We need not doubt him. If it hadn't been for that big lead dog he would have died wandering in a circle. He's wonderful, that dog!"

Henderson's face lighted with a pleased smile.

"You noticed that? I'm telling you that dog can think like a man. And he'll stick to me like a real pal. If I'd let Wolf have his head from the first I never would have got off the trail. He knows twice as much as I do."

A chuckle from the man agreed with him.

"You're a *chechako,* ain't you?"

"Meanin' I'm green? I'm green as grass. Only came in over the Chilkoot, last fall. Found there wasn't any welcome in Dawson and came on to Ransom because some idiot struck a lot of gold. Best I could do was to get me a job driving dogs for Eadie."

"Yep, you're green," the man mused. "Anybody's green that would try to buck sun glare with bad eyes."

Henderson shrugged.

"My eyes were always bad. Always getting me in trouble. If I stopped for them, I'd never do anything."

"Son, you're a fool. And a red-headed fool besides. Which sure is the worst kind."

"I guess so," Henderson agreed cheerfully. "But thanks to Wolf I'm in good hands." He added with bold assurance: "And I'd give a lot to know whose hands they are."

There was no answer. The silence was icy and strained. He heard the two of them move away from him. He lay staring at the weird blackness until the sleep of exhaustion claimed him again.

III

JACK HENDERSON was sitting up in his bunk. He was rested and feeling much better. The pain of snow-blindedness was gone. He could distinguish dimly the light the old man passed again and again before his eyes.

"You'll do," his host assured him dryly. "A little rest and them eyes will be all right. Now we'll just put a nice, cool bandage over 'em and see you don't monkey with it."

The cloth was laid about his temples and knotted firmly. Henderson grinned.

"Guess you're afraid I might get some sight back and have a look at you. That it?"

After a short silence came the non-committal answer, "Son, just don't you worry your head. But don't monkey with that bandage. Now we can hit the trail, soon's we scoff us some breakfast."

They loaded him on a sled, his own sled. He knew by the yelping of Wolf. Henderson insisted on greeting the big dog, bestowing fond blows and abuse upon him before he took his place on the sled.

"I'm taking my dogs," the old man announced. "My girl will help with yours."

They were off with a shout of "Mush!" and the whine of runners over hard crust. Henderson heard the girl at the gee-pole, directing his team. He felt the sting of sharp, cold air on his cheek again. He was safe and on his way to Ransom. His spirits rose. He experimented with his bandaged eyes and worked the bandage loose.

All that he gained from that was a confused, out-of-focus impression of drifts flitting past. Then the sun glare smote again and he was glad to jerk the bandage back and shut out the agony of light. His grin was rueful.

"They've got me dead to rights," he mused.

The sled jerked on through the morning. Sometimes he heard the whine of the the other dogs ahead and the shout of the old man's voice. They made a noon camp and the girl came and sat beside him on his sled.

"We're nearly back to the Ransom trail," she said. "My father and I will take you that far. We leave you there, but don't worry, we won't leave you alone until we see some outfit coming that can take care of you."

"You're going to keep up the mystery, I see?"

She answered rather stiffly, "If we wish to remain unknown, isn't that reason enough? After all, we saved your life."

"I'm not ungrateful. But I'm mighty curious."

"Better curb that curiosity, Mr. Henderson."

"Meaning it's dangerous to know you?"

"Perhaps."

"Not even your name? Your first name, now? If I could just think of you as Mabel or Grace or Goldy, or something!"

Her voice told him she was amused.

"Which do I sound like to you?"

"Well," said Henderson thoughtfully, "I'm strong for Betty."

There was a silence and he mused on, "I never did know a girl named Betty, but I'd like to. You sound like a Betty to me."

The silence continued.

He asked, "Are you Betty?"

I was then she said briskly, "Who I am doesn't matter. We are parting company anyway."

"I'm always going to think of you as Betty," Henderson declared. "All my life! I'll never forget you, Betty."

There was no answer. She had gotten up and walked away from him.

THEY reached the Ransom trail early in the afternoon. They had not rested an hour before the old man said, "You're in luck, son. There's an outfit in sight now. Looks like the mail sled. We've got you planted square across his trail and he can't miss you."

Henderson held out his hand and the other's strong hand, mitted like his, grasped it.

"Thanks, Dad," he said. "I won't forget the favor you and the girl did me."

"I rather you did," the other said dryly. "Ordinarily I'm not one to hide my name and business. Just now I am. Forget us."

"I never shall forget you. Or Betty, either. Goodbye, Betty!"

"What's all this?" the old man exclaimed.

"Just a lot of nonsense." The girl's voice was amused. "He christened me Betty because he said I sounded like Betty. Did you ever?"

"Humph!"

"Goodbye, Betty," Henderson called again. She answered, "Goodbye. Good luck."

"Stay where you are and you'll be all right," the old man cautioned. "Good luck, son—and forget about us."

He spoke to his dogs. Henderson heard the whirr of their sled runners grow fainter . . . then silence.

He was alone again on the Ransom trail. But not for long, he knew. Somewhere within a mile or two the mail sled was coming.

Somewhere off to his right two strangers were disappearing. Strangers whose names he did not know, nor their business or where they made their home. They had found him, saved his life, cared for him and turned him out again and everything concerning them was still a mystery.

He had but one clue to that mystery, his memory of a girl's voice. He was never going to forget that voice.

IV

THE old man had called him a red-headed fool. And added that that was the worst kind of a fool.

Jack Henderson was beginning to agree with him.

He sat beside his night fire, a day out from Ransom City and wondered about himself and what he was going to amount to. The sled dogs were out of harness, curled into balls of fur, tails wound about their feet. Their yellow eyes blinked sleepily at the flames or widened at the dark beyond.

Wolf lay near the man he adored, biting ice particles out of the pads of his feet. He paused now and then to watch Henderson's thoughtful face, his own jaws grinning.

The freight sled was hauled off to one side, making one point of support for the canvas strip whose other lashings were fast to a small spruce. The cloth kept out wind and reflected back the fire's glow.

The thermometer was flirting with fifty below again and the aurora was sending experimental shafts of light across a sky of glittering stars. But wind nor cold did not bother the outfit made snug along the bank of a creek.

Familiarity had made this a commonplace scene to Henderson. He loved its crude comfort and the wonderful sense of bodily fatigue at the end of a day's hard driving. But tonight he thought of the nameless old man who had called him a red-headed fool and the girl he knew as Betty. He had thought of them often in the month he had been back driving for Louis Eadie. Always his thoughts made him restless.

Jack Henderson had come north to find a fortune in gold. So far he had found nothing better than a job that guaranteed his existence. The twenty dollars a day Eadie paid him for driving freight met expenses in Ransom City, but no more.

He had come over the White Pass the summer before, learning to pack his own goods along with the other thousands of chechakos, sourdoughs, Indians and dogs. He had straggled over the wilderness trail by Lake Bennet and White Horse to Dawson only to find every inch of promising creek-bed staked, and a city overcrowded and facing starvation.

On the last boat down the Yukon he went on as far as Circle. From there, hearing of the big strike at Ransom, he had gone stampeding along with half a hundred other crazy galoots.

Ransom City was smaller than Dawson, but just as inhospitable to a tenderfoot. And winter was coming down. Henderson, whose money was exhausted, whose outfit was dissipated bit by bit between tidewater and the Yukon, wandered its one street a sorely puzzled redhead.

THEN he had seen a man ambushing a dog.

He was a sinewy, powerful six-footer with black good looks. When Henderson paused to watch, he stood in the midst of a dog yard, heavy whip in hand, taunting and daring the big gray wolf that crouched for a spring.

While Henderson looked on, the gray brute launched itself at its tormentor, jaw wide and fangs gleaming. And the heavy whip butt rose. The blow caught the animal on the shoulder and swept it to one side, sending it kicking.

The whip lashed out before the gray wolf was on his feet. It curled about the quivering brute and the big dog shrank back farther against the kennel fence, yellow eyes filled with hate.

Into this scene Jack Henderson launched himself with a face as red as his hair. He caught the tormentor's raised arm and whirled him about.

"What's the big idea here?"

"What's it to you?"

The black-haired man's lip had lifted in a sneer not unlike the dog's. His small black eyes were baleful.

"Anybody ask you to butt into this?" he inquired with an ominous suavity.

The red-headed fool answered promptly, "I don't need an invitation to butt in when I see a man make a damn' fool of himself."

They stood eying each other, ready to fight or dicker as the die might be cast. Louis Eadie, the freighter, was a big man, but no more formidable looking than the lean stranger in shabby clothes who had lost all his tenderfoot softness somewhere between Skagway and the Yukon.

Louis Eadie turned away first.

"I'm busy," he said. "I haven't got time to waste on you."

"Yes, you have. What's the matter with that dog?"

Eadie assumed a superior calm that smiled at the stranger's insistence.

"The matter with the dog is that he won't work. He's sled broke, but he won't work. Also he's tried to kill me every time I come near him. Anything more you would like to know?"

"New dog?"

"Yes, he's a new dog. Bought him from some Indians. The devil's been eating his head off for a month. He isn't worth the powder to shoot him."

"That's where you're all wrong."

LOUIS EADIE, who owned the freighting business, rich claims and half the camp of Ransom, was too amazed by the calm impudence of this *chechako* to say anything.

The interloper went on, "I'll bet that dog can be made worth ten times his weight in dust if he's handled right."

"Oh, you're a dog expert, are you?"

"Not on sled dogs, but dogs . . . yes."

"All right, Mr. Dog Expert, suppose you burn the wind out of here. I'm busy and I can't afford to monkey with you."

Eadie turned toward the dog, his whip raised. The gray animal drew back against the fence, snarling.

"I'll be damned if you will!" Henderson cried hoarsely.

He was batty on this subject of dogs. Many months he had seen dogs along the trails from the ocean to the Yukon, dogs that strained every nerve and muscle to pack and haul the freight of gold-maddened men.

He had seen dogs abused, beaten, neglected, starved, thrown out to die when misfortune overtook them. He had witnessed mans cruelty to dogs until the subject was a mania with him, a raw and quivering wound upon his soul and this incident was the last straw.

Henderson caught the freighter's arm as he said it. Eadie's whip raised. They glared at each other furiously and battle impended by a hair.

"Look here," Henderson cried, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll break that dog for you. I'll break him and it won't cost you a cent, if I don't make good in a month. I'll do it on one condition, that you leave the dog entirely to me. You keep your big hands off him, understand? I'll bet you anything I've got I can handle that dog inside of a month; make a better dog of him than anything you've got in your kennel."

"You'll bet? You!" Eadie sneered. "You haven't got anything to bet. You're just another bum. The woods are full of your kind, this winter. I've seen you around camp. I know all about you. You're a bum that had the nerve to drift in here hoping this camp would feed you all winter."

"I've got one thing to bet," Henderson answered steadily. "I've got plenty of muscle and I've handled every kind of common labor job you can name. I'll bet you this: Give me a month to break the dog. If I fall down on the job I'll work for you for nothing all winter. If I make good you give me a job hauling freight. How about that? You're going to need dog drivers this winter. You can't get one cheaper than me, if you win the bet."

EADIE'S black eyes glittered with interest. He was sick of the wolf dog, beginning to despair of breaking him. He couldn't even sell the dog when the whole camp knew Wolf as a rebel. And the bet appealed to him as a sporting proposition wherein he risked nothing. He had his own ideas of thrift.

He nodded at the red-haired fool.

"That bet goes. If you lose I'll personally see to it that you pay up and what's more I'll work the tail off you."

He was a big, swaggering man and enjoyed publicity, this Louis Eadie. Last year he had won the first annual dog derby between Ransom and Circle City. He considered that he knew dogs and he told about the red-headed fool far and wide.

Within the month the whole district knew of the bet. Majority opinion was that Jack Henderson was a bumptious fool, riding to a fall.

Men who knew the huskies and malemutes, bearded old-timers who had driven thousands of trail miles, argued that kindness and reason are wasted on the breed. That the wolf strain that runs through most of these mongrels makes them insensible to kindness or fair play. Betting ran high on the outcome, for Ransom camp was in that happy stage of hectic prosperity where men will bet on anything, but odds favored Louis Eadie heavily.

Henderson separated Wolf from the rest of the pack. He allowed the dog no visitor but himself. He fed him personally and spent hours talking to him. At first he made no other advances.

The rebel husky came to know the man. He listened. He suffered him to come near without more than curling back his lips when old memories of cruelty returned.

For two weeks Henderson talked to the dog, fed him and waited for some sign of recognition. The day he came to the dog yard and Wolf raised his head at his word and came slowly toward him, the long wolf tail waving, he knew that he had won. Within the month Wolf was in harness and Jack Henderson had a job freighting between Circle and the new town.

But it was a job and nothing more. That was what worried him as winter passed. He had held enough jobs since the day he ran off from the farm to make his fortune. Jack Henderson wanted to be his

own boss now. He thought of Louis Eadie and scowled at the flames. Eadie was a bully of men as well as dogs. Because a man worked for him, Eadie assumed his rights to find fault with all he did.

Henderson had to bear that because he needed the job. Out of his wages he was saving a little, adding it to the scant remnant of his original grubstake. If he could bear Eadie's bullying three more months, until the thaw, he would have enough to go gold hunting on his own.

"I'll find pay dirt, too," he vowed to the fire. "I'll salt away what I find and use it to start some kind of good business. Then I'll find me a girl like Betty. I guess I could settle down with a wife like her and not be a tramp all my life!"

The words ended in a chuckle. Henderson addressed the big gray husky who had been watching his face so intently from across the fire.

"Betty? Why shucks, I never even saw the girl. Don't even know if her name is Betty. And here I'm planning to marry her when I haven't the slightest notion in the world who she is or where to find her. Wolf, the old man certainly was right. I'm a red-headed fool!"

Wolf cocked his head sagaciously, long ears pointed forward. His jaw opened and his tongue lolled in smiling agreement.

V

HENDERSON reached Ransom City in the middle of the following afternoon. When his freight sled was unloaded of its 800 pounds burden and the dogs turned into the yard, he took Wolf on leash to his own little log cabin. Wolf lived with him because he would submit to handling by no other man.

Henderson examined the dog's foot pads for cuts and went over his sinewy body for harness sores. He gave him his daily feed of rice and tallow and dried salmon. When that was done he prepared his own meal of beans and sourdough biscuit, coffee and canned peaches. He snatched three hours of refreshing sleep. Then he felt ready for sociability.

Ransom City offered the choice of six saloons and the Gold Nugget. The Nugget was the most pretentious of the lot, a dance hall as well as bar with a three-piece orchestra and girls and card games and a wheel. Ransom was not yet two years old, but the Nugget could compare with anything as highly civilized as Dawson or Circle.

Henderson spent his money sparingly at the Nugget, mindful always of the grubstake he coveted. But he was a sociable and restless red-head and felt the need of some recreation whenever he finished the hard winter freighting trip.

On the footpath trodden through the drifts of Ransom's main street he met Fanny Bacon. Fanny was, by camp courtesy, Mrs. Louis Eadie, although the union had no more sanction than the common law.

Fanny's parka was trimmed with the fur of silver fox. The trimming alone was worth a small fortune. Fanny's small feet were enclosed in the usual *mukluks* and swathed by several layers of wool sock, but there were Paris silk stockings underneath the rest, just as there was an extremely smart Paris gown hidden by the parka. Fanny's pert face, framed by silver fur peered up at Jack Henderson and her lips spoke his name.

"Jack, you're the very one to help me!"

"Sure," Henderson agreed, returning her bright smile.

He was conscious of her small hand clinging to his arm as she drew him out of the cutting wind into the shelter of a door. He did not know his employer's wife well, but he liked her smile and her pertness.

Like all Ransom City he knew Fanny Bacon's history. She had been one of the girls at the Nugget a year ago, when the Nugget first opened. She had come to camp with her brother, Tom, a sallow-skinned youth of twenty and the two of them shared a small cabin.

Louis Eadie, already rich by virtue of grubstaking several of the richest discoverers in Ransom district, had fallen instant victim to Fanny's charms. He had expressed his passion by showering Fanny with nuggets.

Eadie won her by offering her weight in gold for her love. Fanny weighed in at 135 pounds at the time and her troy weight valued in dust was more than thirty-four thousand. Louis Eadie paid his bargain on the spot, but rumor had it that Eadie's woman had been obliged to return most of the dowery to him for "investment."

"YOU'RE on your way to the Nugget?" Fancy asked, next.

"I'd thought of it; yes."

"I can't go in there any more." Fanny pouted and shrugged. "Louis doesn't like me to. Can you beat it?"

They exchanged a mutual smile over the strange sense of propriety Louis Eadie had developed.

"I wish you'd keep an eye out for Tom," Fanny whispered more earnestly, her hand clasping Henderson's arm tighter. "The kid is in there tonight again and I don't want him getting into any more jams. Louis has been threatening to fire him if he doesn't cut out the wild life."

Henderson protested, "I can't ride herd on your brother! He's old enough to be his own boss now."

"Yes, you can, Jack! You can if you use a little savvy and kid him along. Tom likes you. He's been stuck on you ever since you tamed Louis' big husky. It's hero worship, don't you see?"

Henderson shrugged. Beneath the windburn he felt his cheeks coloring.

"A fat lot of reason he's got for that," he muttered.

Fanny's sharp, black eyes flashed in the dusk.

"He's got plenty of reason, Jack Henderson. You stay sober and drive dogs better than any man Louis has working for him. And you act more like a man than most I've seen in this camp."

"All right, all right," Henderson protested, uneasy at this outspoken admiration. "If I can handle dogs, I guess I can handle Tom. I'll kid him into going home to bed. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, it is, Jack." Fanny clasped her mittened little hands earnestly. "And give him a song and dance about keeping out of the Nugget, will you? He'll take it from you. Good, straight fatherly advice and make it strong. The kid has me worried, lately."

He saw that Fanny was worried. Her devotion to this rather unprepossessing younger brother was a matter for common gossip. Tom Bacon worked as an accountant and general clerk in Louis Eadie's office and his employment as well as the gold dust was a part of Fanny's bargain with Eadie.

"I'll spank him and send him home. I'll lecture him like a father confessor," Henderson grinned. "And you'd better run along home before you freeze an ear. Or Louis finds you're out."

Fanny lingered to clasp his hand between her own.

"You're a dear, Jack Henderson. Just for that I hope you find this mysterious Betty girl you've been raving about so much."

She laughed as she said it. Henderson's story of his snow blindness and the mystery of his rescuers had been circulated about the camp. It had not received general belief. Most of the hearers thought Henderson's affliction had caused a delirium, that he had dreamed that strange adventure and that the mail sled had rescued him from an untimely death along the Circle City trail.

Sometimes Henderson wondered if the camp was not right. Perhaps there had been no cabin, no old man, no mysterious Betty. He could think of but one reason why such a pair would try to hide their identity in the wilderness, and that was fear of the law. But these two had not talked or acted like criminals. He could not believe that of them. Since that explanation was preposterous he began to think they too were the stuff dreams are made of.

It was a thoughtful and saddened redhead who came into the Nugget.

HENDERSON met men he knew at the bar and about the several games of chance. He heard the gossip current since his last return to town.

There had been two wildcat stampedes within ten days. Half the men in Ransom had gone out on trail in fifty-below weather in a mad rush for creeks rumored to be fabulously rich.

Nothing had come of this excitement so far except new stakes in the frozen ground and new entries on the gold commissioner's books. A few hardy souls who had melted off the ice and gravel had panned out scarcely a color. The stampeders had been sold and three men had frozen to death, exhausted by the hardships of the mid-winter trail.

And yet the camp was ready to stampede again. Henderson could feel it in the air. Men were jumpy, irritable with the long confinement of winter, half-mad with

visions of fabulous pay-dirt. The next idle rumor that came along would set them off again.

He listened to the gossip and pondered the folly of stampeding and knew in his heart that he, too, could be swept away by some fantastic rumor of gold at the grass roots. As he listened Henderson watched the big room and its varied activities for a glimpse of Tom Bacon. He asked a man about Tom presently.

"The Yellow Kid? Sure, he was in here a while back. I saw him around."

Another informant chipped in. "I guess he blew. I hear he dropped a lot of money bucking the wheel."

Somebody else thought they had seen Tom with one of the girls, but Henderson could get no clue from them. He stopped at the wheel and spoke in the banker's ear.

"Tom Bacon been around?"

"Maybe. A lot of people have been around tonight."

Hard, cold eyes bored inquisitively into the questioner's.

"I asked you if Tom Bacon had been in here tonight," Henderson repeated in a steady voice.

"I answered you."

Henderson's eyes were blue and they narrowed now and took on a more intense color and glitter like the cold blue of a glacial lake.

"Just how much did Tom lose on your crooked wheel tonight?" he asked the gambler softly.

The gambler moved uneasily before that searching look.

"I'm busy," he snarled. "Come around and talk to me later."

"If I do," Henderson said in a level, cold voice, "I'll talk in the only language you can understand. And you won't like it. How much did Tom drop?"

"Say, what's eating you? Give me time to tell you, will you! If you're a friend of Tom's I'll give you the low-down. The Yellow Kid was in here an hour ago. He lost a few ounces. . . . Well, maybe a thousand in dust altogether. Then he went away. He should worry about that with a brother-in-law that owns half the camp!"

"He went away, did he?"

"Sure. He went away laughing. If you're so thick with him tell him to stay sober next time he goes up against a game."

VI

HENDERSON turned away, very thoughtful. The report did not fit Tom Bacon. The boy had vices, but drunkenness was not one. Rather he fancied himself as the cold sober gambler with nerves of steel.

If he had dropped a thousand in dust and turned away laughing, what had gotten into him? And whose thousand had he lost? A thousand was not high play at the Nugget, but it was a lot for Tom Bacon, clerk on salary, to drop on the wheel.

Laughing, was he? Henderson remembered men who acted as though they were drunk just before they had jumped off a dock or put a bullet in their head. They were not drunk, but hysterical with despair! Maybe that was Tom's state!

He jerked his parka hood about his head and pulled on his mittens as he strode hastily out of the Nugget. Out under the stars he began to run along the trail that straggled through the town's drifted street.

Tom Bacon was in none of the other places where men gathered. Henderson looked hastily en route and then went on more swiftly toward the small cabin near the creek where Fanny and her brother had first established a home.

A light showed in the cabin. Henderson hammered on the door and set his shoulder against it without waiting an answer. The door swung inward—few in Ransom ever locked or barred their doors—and the intruder faced a pallid youth who had leaped up from his chair, a pistol in his hand.

Henderson saw the pistol and guessed its intended use by the hysterically working face of Tom Bacon. He ignored the incident, treating it as if it were beneath notice as he turned his back to close the door, then drew another chair toward the stove.

"What is this, a cold storage plant?" he grumbled, glancing into the Yukon stove. "This fire's pretty nearly out."

He began replenishing the fire.

Tom stared at him uncertainly. He was a narrow-shouldered youngster with some of Fanny's pert good looks but softer eyes and slacker lips than his shrewd sister possessed. He glanced uncertainly at

Henderson, who was mending the fire, then at the weapon in his hand. His face grew red. He tried to bluff.

"What's the idea, breaking in on me? You're lucky I didn't blow a hole in you. Anyhow, I want you to get out. I've got troubles enough here—"

HENDERSON grinned at Bacon over his shoulder.

"Sure, sure, Tom! Plenty of troubles. If you were figuring on blowing your brains out, go ahead. Don't let me interrupt."

Tom glanced uncertainly at the pistol and laid it aside.

"What do you want, anyhow?"

"Nothing. Just dropped in to talk to you. And get warm."

"I don't want to talk. . . . honest. Jack, I'm busy. I'm in a mess. I'm all upset and half crazy and for heaven's sake get out, will you!"

"Why, no," Henderson said, thinking it over. "I don't believe I will. I had a hunch you were in kind of a mess, Tom. You dropped a thousand on the wheel, didn't you?"

Tom started violently.

"Does the whole camp know it already?"

"Nobody but you and me and the banker, unless you told. That thousand belonged to Louis, I suppose?"

"Where else would I get hold of any dust? You didn't think I saved it out of what he pays me!"

"You just borrowed it. I know, Tom. You had doped out a system for beating the numbers and all you needed was a measly grubstake that you could run into a million before morning. That's the way it was?"

Tom dropped into a chair and raised sullen eyes.

"Something like that."

"You got kind of tired waiting to make a fortune the regular way?"

"A fortune? How can I make a fortune here? What Louis pays me don't keep me alive. And I can't go prospecting; my health is bad. I tried grubstaking a fellow, but his claim, and mine, too, turned out no good."

He gulped hysterically.

Then he cried at Henderson, "I had to have money. A lot of it. For Fanny's sake, too. I want to get her away from Louis.

"He treats her rotten. He's always throwing it up to her he bought her for her weight in dust, but he's a dirty liar. He took that away from her again.

"He's poison mean about every cent she has to spend to keep alive. Oh, no, not in public! He buys her a lot of fine clothes and makes her wear 'em, because it gets him a cheap reputation for being a hot sport, but he gives her the devil if she spends four bits for herself where it won't advertise his big heart! He's rotten to Fanny and I'd like to kill him!"

Henderson rationalized slowly, "Well, Tom, you couldn't do that if you blew your own brains out first."

TOM almost grinned.

Then he said, "Oh, shut up. And get out, will you, Jack? I'm miserable. Louis will fire me. But what's worse, he'll make Fanny's life hell because he's got something on me."

Henderson made no move to go. He stared at the miserable amateur gambler and demanded suddenly, "How old are you?"

"I'm pretty near twenty-two. What of it?"

"I was just wondering if your signature to anything was legal. I wanted to talk business to you. You say you own a claim?"

"Number eleven above on Craw Creek. I grubstaked Hardluck Billy Harrison and he located for me."

Henderson made a wry face.

"Ouch! That old fool never found enough to buy him beans."

"I know it," Tom admitted glumly. "But I figured anybody that had lost so often was bound to win some time. Well, he didn't."

"That claim is all you've got, I suppose?"

Tom nodded gloomily.

"Then it will have to do. Sign over a half interest to me."

"What do you mean?"

Henderson had risen. Ignoring questions, he demanded paper and ink and himself wrote out a transfer of the half interest in Number Eleven, Craw Creek.

"Sign here," he said.

Tom read the paper slowly, then sprang up with open mouth.

"Jack Jack, you're buying a half interest? For a thousand dollars!"

"Right," Henderson nodded.

"But, Jack, can you? Will you? . . . Oh, my God!"

"Take it easy," Henderson said, his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'll buy half your claim. You pay that thousand back to Louis' safe before he finds the dust is missing. And listen, Tom, don't go up against that wheel again until you strike pay dirt on Craw Creek. I guess that will be a long enough reform to do you some good."

VII

THE dogs swung into the hard-packed trail that followed the river into Ransom City. They had but five miles to go and they were going to finish with a dash.

Wolf had seen the hard track before the light sled was out of the drifts of a shortcut. The lead dog lunged forward with a yelp that waked his fellow toilers to a burst of speed. Henderson, running beside the gee-pole, was hard put to it to keep the pace. They must be doing a good fifteen miles, perhaps better! He dropped back and threw himself on the light sled as it lunged past him, raising a cheery shout:

"Mush! Mush! Hi, hi, hi! Mush, you beggars!"

This was dusk of a cold, clear afternoon and the evening shadows turned the snowy landscape to delicate blues. Henderson, glancing at the deep blue sky, the transparent shadows over drifts and hills and the white twinkling stars, thought of an old Delft tile picturing a Holland winter that he had seen somewhere in the States before he began to wander.

For several days he had been marking time in Ransom, waiting orders from Eadie. The dogs were going stale and he had been working them out over thirty miles of river ice and soft drift through the afternoon.

The night was still now, so still that the earth seemed to hold its breath listening for a whispered message from the stars. He felt the cold increase and shivered in anticipation of town and the warmth of his cabin and supper.

Out of the mouth of a side canyon just ahead another sled swung onto the trail. It was a light outfit with five dogs and a single passenger.

As Henderson drew alongside he recognized passenger and outfit. Louis Eadie had bestowed upon his purchased bride a smart little trail sled and five well-matched malemutes. When Fanny drove this turnout, smart in her fox furs and beaded *mukluks* of Indian make, she was a sight of Ransom district. Women were few and none ever went on the trail so smartly equipped as Fanny Bacon Eadie.

IT was Fanny who waved now. She halted Henderson with a deft swing of her sled across his path. Wolf barely swerved his team from collision and the dogs bristled and exchanged snarls. Both drivers sprang out and hauled the belligerents farther apart.

"I've been waiting for you, Jack," Fanny said when this was done. "Sit down here and talk."

She sat on her sled and invited him to share the fur robe. Henderson remained on his feet, smiling because she smiled, but slightly uneasy in her presence.

"I wanted to speak to you about what you did for Tom," Fanny explained. "I've been trying to do it for two days without Louis seeing me and getting curious. When I saw you start out today I knew it was my only chance."

Fanny's dark eyes were bright. Her look was breathless as she turned her face to Henderson's. She caught at his hand and pressed it earnestly.

"Jack, you were a darling to Tom. He told me all about it. I suspected something and made him tell."

"That's all right," Henderson mumbled. "But I don't see why the fool had to tell you."

"No, you wouldn't! You would just prefer to do a favor to a kid who hasn't any claim at all on you and keep it dark. That's just the decent sort of sport you are!"

"Oh, shucks, Fanny!"

Henderson withdrew his hand and grinned at her sheepishly.

"You don't fool me," Fanny exclaimed. "You're white clear through, and I know it. You're the whitest man I ever met, Jack Henderson. That's what I've been running away from town to tell you."

Her eyes had tears in them. Henderson was embarrassed.

"And I wanted to tell you, too, that we'll pay back every cent of that dust soon," Fanny went on. "Louis isn't the big-hearted spender you'd take him for, but I can dig up that thousand and I'm going to—"

"THERE'S no hurry. Let the boy pay!"

"The boy will pay. He means to, Jack. We're not the kind that don't pay debts, whatever else we are. I came to tell you that and—and to say that if you ever want anything I've got—the shirt off my back, anything!—you just let me know and it's yours."

Fanny caught his hand again. She saw Henderson's uneasy glance around and guessed his discomfiture.

"You want to go, don't you?" Her voice was wistful. "I guess you think it might be bad luck to stop and talk to me in case Louis should come along."

He answered stoutly, "I'll risk that kind of bad luck, Fanny, any time I can help you out! But I was just thinking he might make it unpleasant for you—"

"If he knew I had sneaked out to meet you? He would!"

She looked at him shrewdly.

"But I guess you're not afraid of Louis Eadie," she said and laughed.

"No. And I'm not looking for trouble, either. So long, Fanny."

Henderson turned and spoke to his dogs. The waiting team tugged the sled under way. Henderson ran beside it until it gained speed, leaped aboard and was off with a final wave at Fanny.

Fanny lingered on the trail until after Henderson was gone. She sat on her sled, chin propped in her gloved and mittened hand, staring after him. When she rose finally her shoulders had a dispirited droop.

"Oh, well!" she remarked and roused her dogs.

She returned to Ransom by the roundabout trail she had taken out from town and as she went back, some distance behind her team and out of her sight, a shadowy form followed with long, practiced strides. Louis Eadie had provided his wife with an escort, all unknown to her, and the escort was one of Louis' Indian henchmen, Skookum George, who could outrun any dog team on the Yukon.

"BOSS wants to see you at the office," Henderson was told when he came to the dog yard next morning, expecting orders to take out a sled. He went with rising curiosity toward the log store and warehouse where Louis Eadie transacted business.

Eadie was alone in the partitioned office. He closed the door after his driver.

Eadie's six feet and odd inches bulked big in a mackinaw coat that flapped open. He looked sullen and uncertain and his handsome black eyes were not friendly. He threw himself into the one chair in the room and left Henderson standing.

"I want to talk to you about a personal matter," he began.

"All right, shoot."

"Maybe you can guess what it is?"

"Well, I can't. What is it?"

Eadie's full, red lips turned sullen. He glanced resentfully at the red-haired young man who was never abashed in his presence.

Louis Eadie was primarily a man of swift, unbridled passions. He had had luck in the first hectic days of Ransom and was growing richer steadily and like many a man surprised by riches he was beginning to feel the dignities and responsibility of his public position.

In Henderson he recognized a man of superior breeding and better opportunities. He felt that what he had to say to him should be handled as between gentlemen, and it annoyed him that he was uncertain how to go about it. He went about it suddenly and with bad judgment.

"I want to talk to you about Fanny," he said.

"Yes? What about Mrs. Eadie?"

"You still think of her as Mrs. Eadie, do you? I'm glad to know you've got that much respect for another man's property."

Henderson reddened at the sneer.

"I don't get you," he said. He stared blankly at Eadie.

"I guess you do, all right! Maybe there wasn't any harm in anything you did, but I'm not keen on having my wife sneak out of town to meet one of my drivers on the trail. What I want to know is, what in blazes kind of a secret have you

two got that you have to sneak out and talk it over that way?"

Henderson's resentment flamed as red as his hair, but he remembered that Fanny's peace of mind depended somewhat on how he took this rebuke. It was plain Eadie had his wife spied upon and knew all about their meeting.

That there was no harm in that encounter or scarcely one word exchanged that would suggest duplicity, Eadie would never believe. Eadie judged others by himself and he had no faith in the woman he had bought with such a public flourish of riches.

Henderson said in a low tone but with perfect distinctness, "I happened to meet Mrs. Eadie on the trail. Her brother and I are friends and she stopped to ask me if he was behaving himself around camp, which I was glad to say he is. And that's all we had to share in the way of a secret."

He looked his employer squarely in the eye and added, his tone still low and controlled, "And as for you, Eadie, if you had anything better than the soul of a louse you wouldn't insult your wife or yourself by putting hired spies on her trail. Gentlemen don't do those things."

The import of this dawned upon Eadie, and waves of scarlet went over his face. He half started from his chair, then sank back to glare helplessly at his dog driver.

He burst out finally, "Well, I don't like it. Don't do it again. I don't like it, understand?"

"Then lump it," Henderson retorted and turning his back, left Eadie alone in the office.

VIII

LOUIS EADIE said no more about his wife. He said very little about anything to Jack Henderson, though Jack was rated now as his best trail driver, capable of getting more out of dogs than any of them.

In the two weeks that had passed since the interview in Eadie's office, Henderson had seen Fanny but once and that with her husband nearby. Fanny showed a disposition to linger in talk with him. Henderson, from a sheer sense of deviltry, was tempted to encourage her. He knew how mad it would make Eadie.

He cut the interview short, however, with a plea of work. He was not looking for trouble. All he wanted was his chance to make a stake and go looking for gold and the girl named Betty.

"Women certainly beat the devil," he confided to Wolf one night as they camped in the drifts. "Here one of 'em saves my life and I can't even get a chance to find her and thank her prettily. Then I go do a little favor for another one, about as important as picking up her handkerchief, and I've got to run to cover to avoid her gratitude."

Henderson came in off the trail late from that last freighting trip. He left the loaded sled at the warehouse and saw that his dogs were fed. Then, with Wolf, he hurried to his own cabin, stiff and weary.

Even before he saw the dim radiance of a light through the crude window of bottles and clay daubing, Wolf sensed the presence of a visitor. The big gray dog bristled and stopped, ears forward, a soft rumbling in his throat.

"Oh, shut up," Henderson said wearily, "it's just one of the boys waiting to suggest a poker game. But we're going to hit the blankets tonight, boy, both of us!"

IT was not one of the boys, but Fanny Bacon who rose as Henderson pushed open his door. Fanny had a warm fire going. She had laid aside her parka and outer wrappings. Her frivolous red dress made a vivid flame in the light of an oil lamp. What was more, Fanny had been cooking! The cabin smelled of frying pork and potatoes and coffee.

She greeted him with an excited laugh. "I knew you were coming back and had to see you. While I waited I cooked you a nice supper. Don't I look domestic?"

"You look too darned domestic for my taste," Henderson thought, but was polite enough not to say it. Yet his face told some of his thoughts.

Fanny went on, "Louis is out on the trail on some business. You needn't look so inhospitable. Now wash up and eat your supper."

"If Louis is out of town that's all the more reason you shouldn't be here," Henderson said seriously. "Listen, Fanny, this camp knows and talks about everything everybody does."

Fanny shrugged angrily.

"What do I care? I'm old enough to know my way around. And I'm behaving. I tell you I wanted to talk to you. Jack, don't be so darned hard-boiled."

Henderson gave it up. Fanny began setting food on his table and when he ate she drew a chair near and watched him.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Several things. I've been thinking about you a lot lately. And how much Tom and I owe you—"

"Forget it!"

"I won't forget it. But I've got a scheme that maybe will do you a favor and I came to tell you about it." She looked at him shrewdly. "Jack, are you still crazy about this Betty girl you raved about? The one you never saw?"

"I heard her voice, you know. Yes, I'm crazy about her."

Fanny laughed.

"Men are the biggest fools. The nicer they are, the less sense they've got. But it's no use telling you. You want to find her, don't you?"

"Yes," said Henderson, glad of somebody besides Wolf to tell it to. "That's what I'm going to do, Fanny, if it takes me the rest of my life."

"All right, then, I'll help you. That's what I came to tell you. Louis has men working for him that know the whole district. Some of the breeds or Indians that bring in furs are bound to run across this pair you tell about. Without anybody knowing it, I'm going to offer a reward to the man who brings me definite news of them. And then I'll let you know."

Henderson's face broke into a joyous smile that made him look years younger.

"Great Scott, that's an idea! You've got a brain like Napoleon! Will you do that for me, Fanny?"

Fanny looked wistfully at the boyish grin. He was like a kid anticipating Christmas, she thought. He wasn't anything but a kid about women, no matter how much of a man he was.

She made her voice cordial and assured.

"You bet I'll do it, for you, big fellow!"

They shook hands on the bargain.

AS their hands clasped the cabin door burst open. It was Tom Bacon who rushed in, calling as he came, "Jack! Jack Henderson!"

Tom's widening eyes comprehended the scene and recognized his sister as Henderson's visitor. His mouth opened comically.

"You've got a nerve coming here the minute Louis hits the trail," he gasped.

"Never mind that stuff," Henderson warned him quickly. "All you've got to do is keep your mouth shut."

"Of course I will," Tom declared, reddening. "Do you take me for a plumb *chechako* fool?"

He lowered his voice anxiously.

"But listen, Fan, you oughtn't to do it. You know Louis is red hot because you talked to Jack on the trail!"

"Suppose you mind your own business," Fanny said coolly. "What brought you here, anyway? It wasn't snooping, I know, because you're not the snooping kind, whatever else you are."

Reminded of his errand the Yellow Kid's eyes bulged again. He clutched hysterically at Henderson's arm.

"Jack, I came to tip you off. It's the biggest thing in years. Louis is in on it, and two or three old-timers and not another soul. There's a big strike on Sugar Creek and not a stake driven yet!"

"Oh, heaven," Fanny cried, "another fool stampede!"

"That shows how much you know. Fool stampede! I tell you this one's on the level. The little bunch that know about it aren't saying a word; they're out on trail right now. Yeah, and Louis with 'em!"

"Is that what took Louis out?" Fanny exclaimed.

"You bet it's what took Louis out! If I hadn't overheard some talk, nobody would have guessed it. But he's gone and he's got the fastest dogs in the yard. And there aren't half a dozen men in Ransom City know about it yet!"

Tom looked from one to the other, his face working.

"You think I'm a fool, do you? You think I'm just a kid and crazy. Well, I'm crazy like a fox this time. I've got dogs and I'm on my way to Sugar Creek. I wouldn't stop a second to tell a soul except Jack here, because he's been so white to both of us."

Henderson said suddenly, "Tom, you're sure this is on the level?"

Tom said, "Listen, you've heard of Chilkoot Smith?"

"Is Smith in on this?"

"He is. He and a couple of other old-timers. Somebody tipped them off and they came into the district, but they stayed out away from town, so nobody would get wise to their plans. It was one of Louis' men who ran across their outfit and got a hint of what they're up to. He burned the wind to get here and tipped Louis off this afternoon. I heard the whole thing, and I've been hitting the high spots since."

Henderson was frowning, his face excited. Chilkoot Smith he knew by reputation. The man was a millionaire several times over. If old Chilkoot was stampeding in mid-winter to a new creek, it must be because that ground was rich indeed!

"LORD, if I had dogs!" Henderson exclaimed.

"You can buy dogs if you hustle," Tom began. His sister broke in. "Buy dogs, nothing! He's got five dogs, because I'm giving him mine."

"Great" Tom beamed at his sister. "I never thought of them or I'd have borrowed them first. I had to buy mine and it cleaned me of every ounce of dust I own."

Henderson was puzzled, hesitating between his desire to stampede on this sure information and his doubts about Fanny's dogs.

She read his mind and exclaimed, "These are my dogs. Louis hasn't anything to do with 'em. I bought 'em before I married him. And you've got to accept them, Jack!"

"I will," Henderson cried. His eyes were bright. "They're smart malemutes, and I'll take Wolf for lead, because nobody else can drive him and he won't do Louis any good. Now about a sled and a light pack—"

He broke off with a groan.

"I forgot!"

"Forgot what?" Fanny cried.

"I'm working for Louis Eadie. I gave him my word to stick till the thaw. I can't jump my job, not for any stampede."

"Well of all the innocent idiots," Fanny raged. "There isn't a man in this camp or anywhere in Alaska wouldn't jump his job or his marriage or anything else to stampede on a sure tip. Why, you poor sucker, you've got to look out for yourself first when it comes to a race for gold! Why, listen—"

Henderson shook his head gloomily.

"Nope, it's off. I don't care what everybody else in Alaska would do, I won't. I gave my word and I'll keep it."

He looked truculently at Tom, who had doubled up with mirth.

"There's nothing so side-splitting about it that I can see," he began with dignity. "It wouldn't hurt you any to always keep your word—"

Tom's mirthful howl cried him down.

"Oh, oh . . . This is rich! He . . . he isn't . . . Listen, Fanny, the poor boob won't jump his job to stampede, but the joke is he hasn't got any job!"

"What do you mean?" Henderson demanded. "Of course I've got a job and I gave my word—"

"What do you mean, Tom? Don't act like an idiot," Fanny exclaimed.

Tom drew a folded paper from his pocket and passed it to Henderson.

"Louis told me to hand it to you," he said. "It was the last business he attended to before he went stampeding. Read it, Jack. Read it!"

Henderson read and his face flamed; his grin flashed.

"I'm fired," he announced. "That's what this says, and Louis himself signed it. He's been sore ever since he hired me and now he's got even by firing me. Well!"

He grinned breathlessly from one to the other.

"I never enjoyed being fired so much in all my life," he declared.

"Fanny, hustle up your five dogs. I'm going to beat Louis Eadie to Sugar Creek and back or die on the trail"

IX

RANSOM CITY was bustling with feverish but secret activity before the Aurora had vanished in the light of the next day. The secret of a new strike, less than twenty-four hours ago the exclusive property of Louis Eadie and his trapper informant, was now common with half the town.

There are men who can keep secrets and women, too, but the secret of a gold strike is one of those things that seem too ooze out into the very air and are breathed in by other men of acute perceptions. Already half of Ransom was ready to stampede and the other half, scenting undue activity and excitement, was running in circles trying to find out what it was all about.

The Yukon trail was dotted with pedestrians laden with light stampede packs. Dog teams were racing along the hard-packed snow, their drivers shouting for right of way. Here and there two teams came into collision. Cursing, shouting men belabored the huskies and malemutes tangled into a fighting snarl.

The news was out. Gold had been found on Sugar Creek. Every stampeder in the lot started on the assumption that he and one other alone shared the secret and learned within an hour that the whole district knew.

In Ransom as well as nearby smaller camps, dogs were as hard to find as diamonds. A sled dog worth twenty-five dollars in summer, perhaps a hundred in mid-winter, was worth eight hundred, even a thousand, at this hectic moment. And there were plenty of men, unable to find dogs, who hit the trail afoot despite the bitter temperature and threat of blizzard that came with the daylight.

Miles up the Yukon, ahead of all this rabble, a light sled sped bounding over the packed snow with five malemutes and a big gray wolf in the lead. Jack Henderson ran beside his outfit, glad of the exercise that kept him warm.

Every lungful of the bitter air burned throat and nose and lungs like liquid flame. His parka hood was drawn close, leaving only the eyes and nose exposed. The lower half of his face was masked in a lacy network of congealed breath that constantly showered frost particles.

Henderson had hit the trail at midnight. Under the aurora and the stars he had got a head start on the stampeders and ever since the miles between them grew. As far as he knew, there was but one man from Ransom before him, Louis Eadie. Chilkoot Smith and the several sourdoughs reported with him also shared the tremendous secret of new pay dirt.

THE dogs were running without the whip. Henderson never used a whip except in case of a snarl, and then only sparingly. Instead, he talked to his animals whenever he could spare breath and the stream of encouragement and hilarious profanity brought eager whines from the straining half dozen. Fanny Bacon's malemutes could run and they loved to run.

When the sled struck glare ice or the river trail was smooth and well packed, Henderson flung himself on it and rested. As he clung, face down, he looked over his shoulder at the thick, gray haze of sky with its three shimmering copper-hued suns.

As he watched, a fourth sun wavered fantastically in the heavens. Trouble was coming, he knew by this illusion. Blizzard, intense cold, a bitter wind, the sky promised all of this as nature's handicap to the race for Sugar Creek.

He studied the flat banks of the river ahead. The land lay low and dead white with winter, stretching back into the murky sky. Here and there patches of stark timber added a dead black note to the desolation. Ahead of him, several miles distant, his eye marked a characteristic rise in the ground and a pattern of timber that he knew as the mouth of Sugar Creek.

So far he had done well indeed and he could spare a moment's wonder about young Tom Bacon, struggling along somewhere behind. He hoped the kid could stand the pace, could stake and record his claim and strike it rich. Maybe he could get his sister free of her entanglement with Louis Eadie then. They deserved some better luck, that pair!

His eyes and his thoughts turned ahead again. He racked his memory for what he had heard of Sugar Creek and the lie of the land.

A few miles above its juncture with the Yukon the creek made a sharp bend due westward. If a man could break trail across the low divide that separated the creek from the river, he could save miles otherwise spent following the winding of the creek.

There were hazards to such a course. It might mean packing trail for his team, slow work in powdery, dry winter snow. His one hope was that the

southern slope had caught some of the warmth of winter sun and frozen a crust. He debated the advisability of the two courses during the hour his sled flew rocketing toward the creek mouth.

The notion to take a short-cut won the argument. Before he reached the creek Henderson swerved his sled off the river trail.

The outfit went into the drifts and he stopped to strap on wide snowshoes. He broke trail across to the rise of the low divide and the dogs plodded after him. There was good news for him there, a crust had formed and a light sled stood a chance of getting through in reasonable time.

IT was from this elevated point of vantage that the lone stampeder saw a dog outfit slip out of the mouth of Sugar Creek and head down the Yukon.

He was too far away to learn anything of the man who was urging his team into a run, but he could have sworn it was not Louis Eadie. Who then? Most likely Chilkoot Smith or one of his associates, one of the men who had the first actual information and had staked a claim and was now flying hot-foot for the commissioner's office at Circle.

The sight spurred Henderson to renewed activity and when, a little later, he made out two other distant sleds headed down the creek toward the Yukon he was certain.

The first of the stampeders had staked claims. Perhaps Eadie was among them, but Henderson didn't think so. He had vowed to stake ahead of Louis Eadie if human will and dogflesh and good luck could manage it. He wasn't ready to say he was licked until he had indisputable proof!

Working across the divide, he came upon a fresh trail. A sled and dogs and one man had gone through and not long ahead of him. Somebody else had thought of the short-cut from the Yukon to the point half-way up Sugar Creek, where the discovery was reported.

Henderson let out a frenzied shout and the dogs spurted. He had barely time to snatch a tow rope at the rear of the sled and come flying after them like the tail of a kite in a high wind. He had no breath to voice his thoughts, but his mind buzzed with admiration for Fanny's malemutes. These were dogs!

Not half a mile ahead of him a dog outfit came into view. It was coming his way, leaving Sugar Creek behind and headed for the river. The two sleds drew together rapidly. Henderson recognized the lone driver as Eadie.

As though they were two particles of magnetized steel the two sleds headed straight for each other. Eadie was following the trail he had gone in by, the one Henderson was going in by.

The flying dogs were rushing at each other. Neither driver was in a mood to swerve.

Henderson gritted his teeth and muttered, "If he wants a dog fight, I'll accommodate him."

Then, with not six feet separating them, with the half-crazed animals straining and yelping to be at each other's throats, both men threw themselves on the gee-poles and swerved apart.

As if by mutual consent they *whoaed* their dogs and glared.

LOUIS EADIE'S mouth opened wide when he saw who drove Fanny Bacon's dogs. He took the short distance between them in flying strides, his clenched mittens waving.

"What the devil does this mean?" he roared. "Who gave you my dogs?"

Henderson stood his ground, outwardly cool. He had caught Wolf by the collar as Eadie came up, for the half-mad leader was snarling and ready to leap at the freighter's throat. He looked up with a grin at Eadie's greeting.

"They're not your dogs," he said. "You know that. They were Fanny's. Now they're mine. She gave them to me. They never were yours. Even if you said so to advertise your generosity."

"That dog is mine," Eadie roared. "You stole Wolf"

"You can have him back," Henderson grinned.

He loosed his hold on Wolf's collar as he spoke and the brute leaped, dragging harness and team mates in his fury to be at Eadie's throat. Eadie jumped back to escape the slavering jaws. He shouted something profane and frightened and

Henderson caught the gray dog before he could leap again. He spoke harshly and Wolf stood quiet, still bristling and growling.

"I haven't got time to monkey with this business here," Eadie panted, trying to regain some dignity. "You've got my dog. I'll see you pay for him. I'll talk to you in Circle after I've recorded Discovery claim."

"You got Discovery?"

"I sure did. And I'll keep it, too. Don't try pulling my stakes. A man that would steal dogs might think of a trick like that."

Henderson stepped closer until he almost touched the black-haired freighter. His eyes were cold with fury and he trembled with it.

Then wisdom conquered his rage. There were other stampeders close on their heels. And on Sugar Creek, not five miles away, rich ground waited the first-comers. His fortune was there, waiting for him. What kind of a red-headed fool would he be to toss that away for the fun of a fist fight with Louis Eadie!

"HIT the trail," he snapped. "You'll be lucky if I don't beat you in to Circle as it is. And I'll talk plain to you there."

Eadie, too, had yielded to common sense. Gold was bigger than this private grudge. He whirled about toward his waiting team, cursing them as he ran. The dog whip cracked and his animals, seven well-matched malemutes, sprang into action. Eadie ran beside them, the lash snapping while his stream of profanity and the sting of leather drove them into a frenzy.

Henderson watched him go with a bitter smile and a shrug.

"Discovery claim," he muttered. "Probably the richest ground on the creek. How did he get it unless he pulled some other poor devil's stakes!"

Then the fever of gold hunting came back and obliterated every other thought. There it was, just ahead, the fortune he coveted! He saw it as in a vision, coarse gold, nugget gold, lying waiting in the gravel of Sugar Creek while he tarried to curse Louis Eadie. What an imbecile he was!

Henderson whirled and shouted at Wolf.

"Mush! Mush on! Hi, boy, hi, hi!"

The sled tore down the slope. The black clump of spruce a mile below seemed to leap toward him. The outfit was among the first of these stark frozen trees when he saw a figure in his path, waving frantically. He *whoaed* the team again, instantly struck by something wild and tragic in the gestures.

The figure was running toward him and Henderson hastened to the meeting, noting as he did so that a light sled had been abandoned beside Eadie's trail. Its dogs were curled up in the snow. A man lay across the sled.

Then he was near the stranger and saw that though she was clad as a man, it was a woman who ran toward him. He had a fleeting, blurred impression of her youth and the sweet charm of face and eyes before she called to him.

The minute she spoke Jack Henderson forgot everything, even gold. A wave of wonder left him weak and trembling.

He knew that voice. It was the girl, Betty.

X

BEFORE she reached him, the girl faltered. Her eyes grew wider as she saw who it was. She looked so undecided Henderson was afraid she meant to run away.

He closed the distance between them and seized her hands.

"I've got to talk to you. I've been looking for you," he began. "You're Betty. You can't deny you're Betty and I've got to talk to you again!"

He was looking straight into her eyes. He thought tumultuously. "She's as pretty as I imagined. No, by thunder, she's twice as pretty as I imagined!"

He saw that the look on her face was tragic, yet she smiled at him tremulously.

"I'm so glad it's you, Jack Henderson. So glad!"

"Something wrong, Betty? What is it?"

The fear came back to her eyes.

"It's Dad. There has been an accident. I've got to have help."

Henderson turned at the urging of her arm and they went toward the sled with its still burden.

"He had a fall back there," Betty was explaining.

"He struck his head on a rock. Oh, Jack . . . "

"Now, take it easy," Henderson said, and his arm was about her shoulder when he saw how worry and fright had affected her. "Take it easy. It'll be all right."

"I know I'm a fool. I never was scared like this before. But I'm afraid he's dying. And I didn't think I could make anybody stop to help us, even if they came by. Not in a gold stampede. One man has passed already and he wouldn't help."

They stopped beside the sled. Henderson pulled back the blankets the unconscious man was wrapped in. He saw that he was an old man who lay with eyes closed, barely breathing. The wound on his skull looked fatal.

"It's pretty bad," he agreed with the girl. "There isn't much we can do with a fracture like that."

"You won't go? You won't desert us like that other?"

"Who said anything about deserting you! Come on, we've got to get a fire going to keep from freezing. Then we can plan."

HENDERSON glanced over their light outfit as he spoke, and he understood.

"You and your father have been stampeding for Sugar Creek?"

She answered proudly, "My father, Pete Ladue, discovered Sugar Creek."

"Discovered it?"

"Certainly. Last fall—"

"You didn't stake a claim!"

She shook her head.

"We were waiting. We kept our secret and waited. It's rich, Jack. Richer than Klondike!"

"But I don't understand this!"

Betty Ladue's smile was proud.

"My father has three old friends," she said. "He wouldn't drive a stake until they had their chance to file claims. Once the news was out there was no way to keep back the mob."

"But . . . good heavens, you waited all these months? You kept this thing secret and risked a fortune?"

"My father is a real sourdough," said Betty and her glance flew to that still figure. "He would rather lose the fortune than betray an old *tilikum.* There were three to be notified. Tin Cow Olsen was in Nome. Salt Creek Jones was at Teller. Chilkoot Smith had gone Outside for the winter. We had to send word to them all before we filed."

Henderson was divided between admiration and amazement at such loyalty.

"We laid low," Betty said with a wan smile. "We lived way off from anybody. We hid and avoided people and took no chances—"

"So that's why you wouldn't tell me your name! Or anything."

"That was the reason."

They stared at each other with understanding and a sense of comradeship that made them better acquainted in a minute than many months of ordinary acquaintance might have done.

"Chilkoot was the last to get here," Betty said. "He came yesterday and we all filed this morning. My father staked Discovery claim."

"Pete Ladue staked Discovery claim?" Henderson exclaimed horrified.

"He deserves it. He found the creek. It's the richest ground."

"You staked, but you haven't filed with the gold commissioner?"

She shook her head.

"How could we? We were on our way to Circle when he got hurt. Olsen, Smith and Jones took the creek trail. We thought we could save time coming by the divide. Then we had that spill and his head hit a rock."

Her eyes flew anxiously toward the sled.

Henderson grasped her arm and turned her so their eyes met.

"Listen to me, Betty. Your stakes were first on Sugar Creek?"

"Yes, yes—"

"Have you told this to anybody, since staking?"

"Yes, to one man." Her small face was beginning to turn pale. "He passed and I asked him to help. It was just after the accident. I told him the story and asked him if he would help get Dad to a doctor. He asked me if I took him for a fool and ran back to his dogs and went on over the hill to Sugar Creek."

"A black-haired man," Henderson cried.

"Man in a red and black mackinaw coat?"

"Yes, yes! Jack, what—"

"LOUIS EADIE!" Henderson exclaimed. "The skunk!"

"I don't understand—"

"Louis Eadie of Ransom. I met him down the trail on his way out. And he boasted to me that he had staked Discovery claim on Sugar Creek and was going to file."

Betty's small hand pressed her frightened mouth.

"But he can't. It's our claim! Dad staked it first."

"If he files first, you'll have a fine time proving it," Henderson growled. "Don't you see, he has pulled your stakes and is beating you to the gold commissioner's office!"

"Oh . . . oh!" Betty's eyes were wide with horror. "What can I do? Dad's been hunting a really big strike for years. It will kill him if he finds he has lost this claim. It's our fortune we always talked of."

Henderson turned to her, speaking rapidly.

"Betty, you've got to trust me. You do trust me?"

"Of course I do!"

Their eyes met and hers promised implicit faith in him.

"There's nothing I can do for your father. Nothing anybody can do, except a surgeon. Just keep him warm and don't move him. Remember, don't try to move him. Give me the proof of your claim on Sugar Creek."

Betty ran to the sled and returned with a paper which Henderson stowed safely under his parka. His eyes considered the two dog teams. Fanny's malemutes were not so fresh as Pete Ladue's dogs, but he knew Fanny's dogs, and he trusted the loyalty of Wolf. He shouted at the gray dog and the leader lined up his team with a sharp, answering yelp.

"What are you doing?" Betty gasped.

"I'm taking your proofs to Circle. I've got to beat Louis Eadie to the commissioner's office.

"Jack, you can't. You haven't staked a claim for yourself!"

Henderson shook off her restraining hand.

"Forget it," he said. "It doesn't count now. I can always—"

Until she spoke, the thought had not entered his mind. His own claim, his fortune he counted so much upon. This was an end to all that campfire dreaming.

There wasn't time to cry over that. The girl who had saved his life was in trouble. Louis Eadie was stealing her gold.

"Forget it, Betty. So long."

He sprang to the gee-pole of his sled and shouted at the dogs. They swerved across the trail and the sled pointed back toward the Yukon. The dogs broke into a run, Wolf streaking out ahead.

Henderson was off, running beside them without even a backward look toward Betty Ladue. She remained motionless, watching as long as they were in sight.

XI

AS he ran beside the dogs, Henderson made swift mental calculations. Circle was forty miles down river.

His team had done a good thirty miles from Ransom and they were bound to play out if forced too hard. On the other hand, Louis Eadie's dogs were not much better off. They had done the same distance, though at a more leisurely pace, because Eadie had started hours earlier.

Eadie could drive dogs! His reputation was known up and down the Yukon. The man who had won the first dog derby between Ransom and Circle had not beaten some of the best trailers in Alaska without possessing skill and courage to a high degree.

The odds looked black against him. But Henderson had an incentive to win that made up for odds. Betty Ladue had trusted him to win more than a dog race. It was her future comfort that was at stake. Should Eadie file on Discovery, no matter how well fortified the girl was by facts, she faced a long and expensive lawsuit and quite possible defeat.

"It's got to be done," Henderson gasped as he ran.

His dogs were hitting an even, lively clip without overstraining themselves. He figured it would be well not to force them now. Eadie had not more than two hours start toward Circle, perhaps less. He would have no reason to force an already

tired team unless he saw and recognized the pursuit.

The strange illusion of multiplied suns was fading from the heavens. A noticeable thickening of the gray light drew the skies closer above the black and white wilderness. There was a curious hush in the air and a sparkling like diamond dust in the northwest, where the sun hovered low.

The cold grew more intense with every moment. Henderson hid as much of his face as he could, but his laboring lungs must have air, though every draught of breath was like a scalding drink.

The sled had topped the divide now. It was going more rapidly, coasting after a running team over the crust toward the Yukon.

Not a mile away, headed down the river ice, Henderson saw a sled with seven dogs. Eadie, without a doubt. He shouted for joy at the sight and determined to keep behind. Let Fanny's dogs take it easy. They would need what strength they could save for a surprise dash when Circle was in view.

THEN the distant dogs and sled and the whole Yukon valley vanished. He was barely through the first of the drifts along the river when it happened. An onrushing cloud of white told of the coming blizzard. A bitter wind ran before it and whipped at his parka.

The first shock of that gale halted dogs and man. For a moment it was as though they had struck a stone wall. Then they gave before it, the man taking reluctant steps backward, his legs planted wide while the shrieking wind tore at him with cruel fangs of deadly cold.

The dogs huddled in the blast and began to whimper as the knife-like gale ruffled their fur. Wolf turned his head, his yellow eyes uneasy, to see what the man bade next.

Henderson's big shoulders bowed lower. Head down he fought for his footing, pushing on slowly and shouting at Wolf.

"Hi, Wolf, mush! Mush on! Dig into it, you old son of sin! Mush, you dogs! Mush!"

The gray lead dog followed orders and the team came to life, following slowly in the trail Henderson was beating with his wide rackets.

The enshrouding white rushed at them and suddenly was upon them. The world was gone. There was nothing to see but snow, snow that drove in long, parallel lines straight past them, riding down a howling wind.

This was the expected. Henderson had used his last few moments of vision to fix firmly in mind the bearing of the river. He plodded across the flats between with this one idea in possession of his entire consciousness. They must reach the ice and the trail. They must do it!

The minutes seemed hours now. All exhilaration of speed had gone from this race. This was dull, unheroic, killing work and nothing more. But it had to be done and done right, for their lives depended on it—more than that, Betty Ladue's claim.

Henderson's feet slipped from under him. He half-slid, half-rolled down a ten-foot bank and rose laughing. He had reached the river. His shins had collided with the upended blocks of an ice jam, frozen solid months before. He ached with the agony of the abrasions, but he was happy.

It was by sense of touch only that he knew the winter trail when he reached it. The blizzard shut out every visible sign. But there was no mistaking the packed snow. The sled swung onto it and turned toward Circle.

THE dogs did better now. The sled had hard surface for its runners and sheltered to some extent by the sunken path, they did not suffer so from the blast.

They were off with a jerk and Henderson threw himself at the sled, glad of a respite. He clung there shouting encouragement at the malemutes, calling on Wolf to do heroic things.

This winter trail was a narrow path of one-sled width. Except where there was a surface swept free by winter winds, two teams could not pass unless one sled went off into the soft, powdery snow that lay, sometimes five and six feet deep, at the side.

Along this trail, all the way from Ransom to Sugar Creek, other outfits might be traveling. In the white murk there was no way to foretell their approach.

Henderson had one reassurance only, the blizzard would discourage all but the hard-

iest stampeders. This, he learned afterward, was almost universally the case. When that howling wind rode down the Yukon, men forgot even the lure of gold and dug in beside the nearest drifts, huddling with their dogs until the Arctic devils had done with making a mock of them.

And the sled flew on.

Wolf ran with belly low, strong legs flying. The five malemutes sped behind him, whining and half mad with the feverish speed. The man on the sled had given up trying to see. He was glad to cling and lie low, getting all the shelter he could against wind and cold.

Then out of nowhere rose a babel of sound, the yelping of dogs, shouted curses, snarls and howls. A blur of objects at the sled. The sled itself upended, jumped almost straight up and tossed its passenger off like a chip.

For a moment Henderson lay on the ice and was conscious only of a vague confusion. He sat up then and rubbed hard at the back of his head until his brain cleared.

All about him a pandemonium raged. Dogs were fighting with the primitive ferocity of the wolf breed. Two men's figures loomed vaguely through the blizzard.

Henderson leaped into the midst of it, his one thought to get his own dogs extricated. He caught at the first snarling, writhing mass of fur he saw and heaved with all his strength. At the end of his arm a malemute emerged from the mêlée. He flung it aside and dived in again.

Sharp teeth ripped the sleeve of his parka. Two sled dogs at death grips skidded between his knees and spilled him.

For a moment he was at the bottom of the heap and the whole world seemed filled with snarling dogs and flashing fangs.

He emerged again, hauling a dog by its hind quarters while at his side a stranger labored with equal decision, showering the tangle with sound Norwegian oaths, untranslatable but vastly satisfactory.

THEN out of the mist of snow and dogs came Louis Eadie. The freighter emerged with a dog whip upraised and held the blow only because he saw a man before him. They faced each other staring. When he saw who it was, Eadie's whip wavered as though to strike.

The third man in this entanglement thrust himself between them, roaring pacifically, "Hey, you damn' fool, cut that out. Yust stick to your dogs and fight later!"

"Where the devil did you come from?" Eadie growled as the arm and whip dropped.

"From Betty Ladue and her old man," Henderson shouted. "If you think you're going to steal Discovery claim from them, you've got another guess coming."

Eadie's mouth opened wide. He looked murderous for the moment, but a heavy hand caught his shoulder from behind. The owner of the team his dogs had met and snarled was in no mood to witness a discussion of other people's troubles.

"Get your damn' dogs off of mine or, by jimminy, I'll begin shooting them," he roared.

They sprang at the task again and Henderson worked to good advantage. Being the last comer, his malemutes had landed atop the heap. He identified the five and dragged them free, cutting harness when he had to.

Wolf he reached last of all and found that monarch holding three of the smaller breed at bay. A few sturdy cuffs and a hard hand on Wolf's collar drew the husky aside and into docility.

Of Fanny's five malemutes, four could still travel. The fifth had a broken leg. Henderson hesitated but a second before he administered a merciful bullet.

He worked fast and hard, his torn parka sleeve dangling about his flying hands. Traces had to be unsnarled and re-tied. Harness must be mended. The murk made it impossible to see anything clearly. The howling wind and snow like powdered glass were torturous to bare hands and face.

Henderson got the job done. Not far off Eadie was busy, too. He could hear him, sometimes see him dimly.

He came to alert attention when he caught Eadie's words, "I'l give you six thousand in dust for the six. You can have a written order on me right here and now. Everybody on the Yukon knows Louis Eadie's word is good."

Eadie was buying fresh dogs!

That was shrewd common sense. Driving the fresh team, he could force a much faster pace than his own jaded animals could hold.

But Henderson had one advantage still.

His dogs were unsnarled and harnessed again. He sprang at them with a shout of "Mush!" Once more they were off, rocketing through the white mystery of cutting snow and deadly cold, holding to the Yukon trail.

XII

THE smooth trail ended suddenly in a chaos of upended ice. The cakes had jammed during some thaw and, frozen solid now, they were an obstacle to travel not unlike a maze of boulders. Henderson seized the haul rope at the front of his sled and tailed on behind the dogs, sometimes hauling, sometimes pushing in his effort to wriggle the sled through.

Fanny's dogs were tiring. They had been through a killing day and the blizzard held steadily, a shrieking maniacal wind and bitter cold that burned the last ounce of energy from any living thing that faced it.

They won through the last of the jam and got on hard trail again. Henderson was running, urging all the speed he could get. The jam he remembered as twenty miles above Circle.

Only half the distance done and his dogs were playing out. And behind him Eadie was coming with a fresh team. He bowed his head against the blast and slogged on, reassuring himself over and over that a man was never beaten until he was dead.

Perhaps Eadie hadn't gotten the fresh dogs. Perhaps their owner refused to sell with the prospect of a claim on Sugar Creek to reckon him on! He had been out two hours since that dogfight and no sign of Eadie yet.

Almost as though it were an answer to these thoughts he heard the yelp of dogs somewhere behind him. A man's voice shouted and a whip cracked. Eadie had overtaken him; it could be no other.

Henderson held stubbornly to the trail. Let Eadie try to pass! There was room for one sled at a time and nothing short of a bullet would put him out of the lead.

Eadie had made out his opponent through the smother. Henderson could hear his shouts for the right of way. Then the noise swept off to his left. Eadie had swerved his sled and was going to try the softer snow, depending on his fresh dogs to smash through and place him in the lead.

"Mush, Wolf! Mush, you beggars! Mush on!"

Henderson ran close beside his dogs urging them. Jaded as they were, they broke into a run that promised to hold the lead. Off to the left he could hear Eadie shouting curses. Eadie's voice was as clear as if he were beside him, but the white smother hid men and dogs from each other.

Once Eadie tried to reach the hard snow. He materialized out of the blizzard, a gray ghost of a man driving ghost dogs. He held the pace a minute alongside Fanny's malemutes, a weird Flying Dutchman of the Yukon. Then he dropped back again and was gone.

TWO, three, four miles had been covered. The racers had not changed position by as much as four hundred feet.

Henderson reeled with fatigue and Fanny's dogs were slackening. Unless he urged his hardest they dropped back to a crawl; their occasional sprints were half-hearted efforts. Henderson saw that the wheeler was limping. Only Wolf, the stout-hearted, kept them moving at all.

Eadie was gaining again. The freighter would hold to the hard track until he was on Henderson's heels, then swerve to right or left in his efforts to pass. Glancing back over his shoulder, Henderson could see his lead dog now. He shouted a warning lest the sleds collide and start another tangle, the one event both men knew they must avoid.

A hoarse bellow of rage from Eadie answered his warning cry. The leader behind veered off to the right. Henderson shouted at his team for another sprint. Wolf sprang out ahead.

There was a shriek of pain and the wheeler was down, dragging behind his team mates, breaking them to a walk. Then a crawl. Then a dead halt. The malemutes stood a moment panting, then began to throw themselves on the snow, with a disregard for the wishes of their driver that told how desperate was their exhaustion. Wolf alone kept his feet, yelping and tugging in an effort to move the outfit.

Off to the right Eadie and his dogs swept on. At times they were nearly swimming in the drifts, but they kept some sort of pace. The outfit passed. Hender-

son saw the shadow of it against the smother, drifting slowly but inexorably ahead of him to regain the trail to Circle. He could only stand, winded, his legs trembling with weariness, a witness to his own defeat.

Well, that was that! Betty Ladue had trusted him to win and he had failed her. His best was not good enough. He stood with chin on his breast, his lungs panting for wind, his hands idle.

It was a thought for his dogs that roused him. They must be as badly off as he. If they were not all to die there on the trail they must find the river bank and timber and make a camp.

HENDERSON roused the team to motion at last, after cutting out his wheel dog and bidding him limp after them. They stragged mournfully off the trail, swimming through drifts, wandering along ice jams and bearing always right toward the bank of the Yukon.

While his thoughts were all upon timber and a fire, the blizzard turned rosy before him, and man and dogs limped into the warmth and glow of somebody's camp.

His coming was heard. A voice roared through the storm. "This way, *tilikum!* Bear right a little. Lots of room and plenty of fire!"

Henderson staggered into the charmed little circle where fire had conquered ice. It was like a little heaven, this oasis of warmth and life in the midst of the white death. He felt the weight of his weariness, now that he had ceased to struggle. Even the task of unharnessing his dogs, necessary as it was, seemed beyond his strength.

A short, bearded man rose from beside the flames as he drew near. His hood was thrown back, revealing a red, snub-nosed face cruelly scarred by some odd frost bite. A briar pipe was thrust between his teeth and stuck up from his jaw at a jaunty angle. He was one of those barrel-bodied, durable men whose outward appearance is an honest advertisement of their uncanny endurance.

"You look like you needed rest," he said with voluble welcome. "Lucky you saw my fire. I've been holding on hell-bent for Circle myself, but, by the lord, this blow has got me licked. 'To the devil with Sugar Creek,' I said. 'I'll hole in till the worst is over.' I guess I'm getting old. Seventy can't scrap like twenty-five."

Henderson had no answer for this. His roving, bloodshot eyes turning about the camp, saw dogs. Six malemutes were curled in the snow, noses under their tails. Six fresh dogs!

He turned on his host and his hoarse voice trembled with eagerness.

"Lend me those dogs. You can name any price you like."

The stranger shook his head decidedly.

"Nothing doing, partner. Sorry."

"I've got to have 'em. I've got to get to Circle. You fix your own price and I'll make good, I tell you. I'm Jack Henderson of Ransom and I keep my word."

The other man continued to shake his head.

"Nope. When I'm too beat out to hold the trail, I guess my dogs deserve a rest too. Not that they ain't fresh enough, but I figure that's fair play. You don't want to go on in this mess either! I've seen too many men froze in drifts on account of bulling along in weather like this. Why, man, you're all in now!"

"No!" Henderson protested. "I tell you I'm not. And I've got to make Circle. I can do it with your dogs. I can beat Louis Eadie in. And I can get a doctor. There's a man dying back at Sugar Creek!"

The short man was unconvinced.

"Nope. As for a man dying, I'll bet there's a lot of 'em dyin' today. The whole trail from Ransom to the creek is filled with damn' fools and *chechakos* that don't know better than to stampede on a day like this."

HENDERSON grasped his arm and shook it angrily.

"I've got to beat Louis Eadie," he exclaimed. "He's ahead of me now, headed for Circle to file on Discovery claim. It isn't his claim. He didn't find it. He pulled another man's stakes. And that other man is hurt and can't get in to file. He's out there in this blizzard with only his daughter to look after him. He's an old-timer, like you—"

The barrel-bodied man opened his mouth and the pipe dropped out unheeded.

"It's Pete Ladue!" he roared.

"Of course it is," Henderson raged. As

fast as he could, he got the details out and now he saw that his words were having weight.

The listener barked suddenly. "Get them dogs of yours out of harness. Sure you can stand the run to Circle?"

"Give me a chance!"

Henderson grinned back and sprang to unharness his own team while the other rounded up the fresh dogs. Between them they made short work of getting the seven hitched to Henderson's sled. After a moment's hesitation, Henderson added Wolf to the string, at the lead.

"That old son of a gun is worth the whole seven," he boasted briefly.

They were off with a shout. The barrel-bodied man ran beside him, pointing out the best short-cut back to the trail. When they struck the hard snow he stopped.

"So long. I'll look after your dogs. If you don't find me here, ask about the neighborhood for Chilkoot Smith."

In the bustle of harnessing Henderson had not thought to ask his name. Smith had not wasted time to volunteer it. But now he understood everything. Chilkoot Smith, Ladue's old partner! No wonder he had changed his mind about the dogs.

The thought of old Chilkoot standing back there on the trail, wishing him Godspeed, lent wings to his feet and put new courage in his heart.

XIII

THE dogs Eadie had bought were no crack racing team. All were of the malemute breed, willing workers, but not brilliant. But they were fresh.

Eadie clung to his sled, rocketing through the flying white blizzard, and was well content. They were worth six thousand on a day like this, well worth it with Discovery claim and Sugar Creek surely in his grasp.

The black-haired freighter grinned at the thought and rose to his knees, clinging precariously with one hand. His right arm swung the dog whip, pouring leather into the six who were already doing their utmost for him.

Though he could see no landmarks through the blizzard, Eadie realized he could not be far from Circle now. On the trail his dogs had been averaging a fair ten miles an hour despite the rough going where they had to plod and contrive to get through drifts and over broken ice.

Eadie had no fear of Jack Henderson. He realized the mileage Fanny's five malemutes had covered and knew how played out they would be.

Let the red-headed fool trail him into Circle if he could make it! Before he could arrive Louis Eadie would claim Discovery on Sugar Creek and who could dispute it except this red-haired tramp and old Pete Ladue's girl?

Old Pete himself would be dead by then if he were not already dead. Eadie had taken one look at the old man's hurt and knew there was no hope for him. Possession of the claim was at least nine points of the law; with only Betty Ladue and a red-haired tramp from nowhere to dispute, possession was all ten.

The thought roused Eadie to a yelling exultation. He was like a man crazed with whisky, but the potion was even more potent, for he was drunk on power. His dog whip whirled and he roared defiance to the blizzard as he flogged the straining brutes.

The malemutes flattened into their fastest run. They were crazed already by excitement and the sting of the whip lash; Eadie's shouts maddened them to frenzy.

The sled was fairly jerked out from under its lone rider. Eadie felt his grip relax, caught wildly at a side bar and missed, caught again at the tow-rope tied behind and held fast. But he was off his feet, dragging, and the dogs were beyond reach of his voice, out of their senses with excitement and terror of the whip.

He jerked madly at the rope's end, half-smothered in flying snow, cursing, kicking in an effort to regain his feet. Before he had the sense to let go he had swung wide across the trail and his head struck a block of ice. He let go then and lay still in the snow.

Sled and dogs vanished in the white smother ahead. He had bade them run and they were running.

EADIE lay unconscious on the trail for nearly a quarter of an hour. When he stirred and began to remember, it was drowsily. The bitter cold was beginning to stiffen him. He almost yielded to the

lure of sleep where he lay, cosy in the snow.

He knew that urge, in time to avoid the pitfall, and sprang up. He was alone, without dogs, marooned in the blizzard. Somewhere ahead lay Circle, just how far he could only guess.

His head had been cut by the ice and blood was frozen over his cheek. The flesh was frozen too. He rubbed savagely with handfuls of the gritty, dry snow until the sting told him the blood was circulating again.

There was nothing to do but to walk. If his team had stuck to the trail, well and good. He dared not wander off trail after them. A man was too easily confused in the white smother. A misstep would fracture a leg or he might lose all sense of direction and wander until he froze to death. He started, cursing his dogs loudly.

He paused at a new sound. A dog team was coming up from behind. Eadie was about to hail when he caught an echo of the driver's voice. Jack Henderson! There was no mistaking Henderson's shout.

He did not bother to figure how Henderson had overtaken him again. He had other things to think about. His decision was made swiftly. Eadie crouched low beside the trail until the first of Henderson's dogs had swept past, then he sprang erect, a pistol in his hand, directly in the path of Henderson.

Henderson stopped almost breast to breast with the freighter. He saw the pistol and Eadie's contorted face.

He heard Eadie's command, "Stick 'em up and keep 'em up!"

Henderson was many kinds of a fool, but not the kind to dispute that gun. His hands went up.

"Stop your dogs," Eadie said.

Henderson yelled and the team came to a halt.

"GET this," Eadie said intently. "I'm taking those dogs. If you make one step to follow, you won't live to tell about it. Stay right where you are."

Henderson returned the black stare without the flicker of an eyelash to betray his own thoughts. His hands were above his head and they had not moved. He was breathing heavily from his run and the shock of this surprise.

His leg shot out suddenly. The kick caught Eadie in the middle and doubled him up. Henderson struck with his right hand at the same moment and sent the pistol flying. He closed in without a second wasted, swinging a right and left that caught Eadie's head and drove him backward and into the snow.

Henderson hesitated a moment then, unwilling to strike a man who was down. That age-old, inbred instinct for fair play betrayed him as it had many men up against an opponent like Eadie.

Eadie rolled over, writhing with pain. He cried aloud, his voice between a scream and a groan, hands clasped about his middle.

Henderson came a step nearer, two steps. He bent lower over the writhing man. Eadie's big arms shot up and seized him about the neck, dragging him down. Eadie rolled free of the toppling body and leaped astride him. His right hand rose and a knife flashed in it. He brought the heavy blade down; struck again and reared back from his bloody job, panting, his lips grinning.

Jack Henderson lay still. While Eadie watched, a dark, warm stain spread on the breast of his parka and began to freeze stiff. Eadie got to his feet, shaking his head impatiently to clear his brain. He looked thoughtfully at the victim of his knife and aimed a deliberate kick at the helpless body. Then he spat and turned grinning toward the waiting team of dogs.

FROM the corner of his eye the freighter saw the hurtling menace and leaped to one side. A flying gray body brushed his shoulder and a wolf's fangs clacked as red jaws met in a tearing bite that barely missed his throat.

How the gray lead dog had got free of harness, he never knew. But Wolf was free, trailing a broken rope from his collar. Missing his first murderous leap at the man he hated, he rose from a cloud of snow, whirling back toward his enemy and crouching for another spring.

Eadie recovered balance. His alarmed glance turned all about him. Not five feet from where he stood and between him and Wolf, he saw an object he coveted more than gold at this moment. The pistol had been knocked from his hand and there it lay in the hard snow.

Beyond the pistol Wolf crouched. The yellow eyes were baleful and the hairy throat rumbled with hate. The thick wolf hair along his neck stood erect. Eadie dared it and made a leap for the pistol. Wolf sprang simultaneously.

The big dog bore his enemy back and this time the fangs fastened in the tough cloth of Eadie's mackinaw coat. The shoulder ripped out. Eadie went down under the attack and rolled with his face in the snow, his hands under him tugging for the knife he had slipped back in his belt scabbard.

He had scant seconds to work in before he rolled free and got to his knees to face his enemy. Wolf sprang again and the knife, held point upward, slashed at his throat. A hot spurt of blood flew into Eadie's face as the furry body shot above him.

Eadie sprang erect then; rather, he started to spring. His foot slipped in the snow as he rose. He toppled, falling back with one outthrust hand supporting him precariously. Before he could better himself the dog was on him again and this time the fangs tore his flesh. Eadie screamed with agony.

For a moment they rolled, savage animals at death grips. The flying snow smothered them and blotted out the picture. Eadie got free once more. His clothing was torn half off him. He was bleeding from a half dozen wounds, but he gained his feet and started to run. He ran blindly, off into the powdery, deep drifts, off into the white blizzard. And the gray wolf dog flew in pursuit with yellow eyes gleaming and a bloody slobber spattering off his jaws.

JACK HENDERSON rose to hands and knees and stared about him. A paroxysm of coughing shook him. Every cough tore at wounds in chest and shoulder.

He wanted to lie down and forget it, but there was something he had to do. He could not remember what it was. He frowned in a childish puzzlement, trying to recall that duty. But it had to be done, it must be done before he drifted back into nothingness.

He regained his feet by painful efforts. He was alone in the blizzard. No sled or dogs could be seen. He shook his head over it. They could not be far off, but where?

He had had dogs, he remembered, and they halted on the trail when Louis Eadie stuck a gun in his middle. Perhaps they had dragged the sled into a drift and bedded themselves down. No doubt that was it, but he hesitated, knowing he must not wander off that beaten track.

Then he remembered. Circle City! He had to get there.

The dogs were gone, but he had to get there just the same. Betty Ladue had trusted him to file on Discovery claim and he had to get there ahead of Louis Eadie.

Eadie was gone, like the dogs. Perhaps he had hours start on him while he had lain in the drifts bleeding and senseless. Henderson shook his head savagely at the thought. Never mind, he had to get to Circle ahead of Eadie and he would!

He lurched off into the blizzard, stumbling on the trail, but always moving on. It was a crazy man's idea; a crazy man's super-human courage and strength that kept him at it. He ceased to be conscious of any thoughts after a time, but his body remained conscious and in motion.

The wind whipped at his torn clothing. The cold numbed his cheeks and nose. Utter weariness made every move a tremulous effort, but he stood erect and moved. And he always moved toward Circle.

Sometime after that, he had no means of measuring how long, he was conscious of a man, then several men surrounding him and supporting him and asking questions. His numb lips muttered many things that were unintelligible. But a few words they understood.

He said, "Gold commissioner's office. Circle City. File Discovery claim on Sugar Creek. In my pocket. Pete Ladue's proofs."

XIV

CHILKOOT SMITH stood on the Yukon trail until the red-haired fool who had borrowed his dogs vanished in the white smother of the blizzard. The old man shook his head after him.

"I'd ought to be driving them dogs," he muttered, "but he can make better time than me. Ain't it hell to be getting old! If it was anybody but Pete Ladue's claim,

wild horses would never get my dogs away from me."

Chilkoot bowed his head to the blast and began to back track toward his fire. Fanny's played-out malemutes were curled up in the snow, the surviving four of them. Chilkoot stared at them, at his own sled and rubbed his chin.

"Well, by godfrey," he declared angrily to the blizzard "I never thought I'd see the day when another man'd do my running for me and leave me setting by a fire. All I need's my knitting to make the picture perfect."

The old man began pacing back and forth before the blaze. Several times he settled down to enjoy his pipe, but as often rose again.

He turned to the nearest of Fanny's four dogs with a sudden oath.

"Get up out of that, you bums! Your day ain't over yet. I ain't going to set here when there's things going on down at Circle, storm or no storm!"

The four malemutes plodded wearily down the long river trail and the snub-nosed old man plodded beside them. It wasn't fancy driving, but Chilkoot wasn't out to make records. Painful as it was to face the driving blast, that was better than sitting idle by a fire, completely left out of the fun.

The plodding outfit came upon an abandoned sled slued across the trail. The dogs had snarled their harness and curled up with dog philosophy, taking a rest when they could get it. They were Chilkoot's own seven who had wandered through the drifts and back again to the hard path. The big, gray wolf dog who had led them was missing.

Chilkoot Smith swore mightily with amazement and begun to circle the spot for further discoveries. He found the body of Louis Eadie, half-buried in snow. It was frozen stiff. He saw that the man had been mortally wounded by the jaws of a wild animal. Hardened old trailer that he was, Chilkoot shuddered and crossed himself.

Of the red-headed stranger there was no sign. There was no sign of the lead dog, except the broken ends of harness still attached to the sled.

Chilkoot loaded Eadie's body on his own sled. He fastened it by a tow rope to the other and lined up his own seven malemutes. He gave the word and started on for Circle at the best speed he could force. Judging by all the signs there had been hell to pay on the trail that day.

AT Circle the old man heard the answer to his amazement. A red-haired man, identified as Jack Henderson of Ransom, had wandered into town out of the blizzard. Two hurrying wayfarers had found him and aided his staggering, uncertain steps to shelter.

The man was badly frozen, weak from two stab wounds in his chest, and exhausted, but he had fought all offers of aid until he had visited the gold commissioner's and filed Discovery claim on Sugar Creek in the name of Pete Ladue.

His last words were of Ladue's own plight and a doctor had started toward Betty and her father.

SIX weeks after this memorable day Circle experienced its first forerunner of spring. A bright sun and a rising thermometer turned the surface snow soft.

The town's interest centered at once on the annual breakup of Yukon ice. Citizens formed the betting pool and every seasoned gambler in the place was busy with pencil and paper, handicapping from the records of past performances.

Chilkoot Smith dropped in to see Jack Henderson. Henderson was sitting up now and feeling great. His release was only a matter of days.

Betty was there when Chilkoot called. Betty had been there every day and the three old-timers gossiped about her devotion to the invalid.

Today Chilkoot surprised the pair and saw at once that something was wrong. There were tears in Betty's eyes, he would swear it. She rose quickly as he came in and walked out of the room without more than a short "Good-bye."

Henderson gave no answer to that. He didn't look glad to see Chilkoot.

"I called," said the old man, slightly embarrassed, "about a little proposition me and Ladue and Jones and Olsen wanted to make to you. Having to do, as it were, with your saving Pete's claim for him."

"Forget about that," Henderson exclaimed.

"Sure, that's what I say. But Pete, he's been worrying his head because you never filed for yourself. He says it's all his fool fault you're a poor man."

"I said forget that stuff," Henderson frowned. "If I want to make a damn' fool of myself, it's my business."

"Exactly! Just what I say. But Pete and the boys got to fussing. Pete, he wants to give you a half interest in that ground, son. He's old and awful set on having his own way and what I say is, why not humor a sick man—"

CHILKOOT'S arguments were interrupted at this point. The invalid sat bolt upright in bed and his pale cheeks burned.

"No," he said loudly. "Nothing doing. Not for you or anybody else. Not for the whole Ladue family, either. What is this? You and Betty been framing up a scheme to drive me crazy? That makes twice today I've said no to that scheme. And I mean *no*."

"Well, I see you do," Chilkoot smiled gently. "Yes, I guess you mean no all right. Yes, sir." His eyes twinkled. "Betty been pestering you, too?"

"Oh, forget it."

"She's a stubborn girl, son. Good deal like old Pete, that way. But a real nice girl. We all kind of hoped you and Betty might make a match of it, seeing you was so interested in each other."

Henderson stared furiously at the old man.

"Hope for something that's likely to happen, next time," he said curtly. "We won't make a match of it. Never. A girl who isn't willing to wait till I find my own gold isn't worth worrying about."

The invalid's face twitched at some agony of heart as he said it. But his voice was resolute as he went on, "I told her as much. We're through, we two. I'm not out to marry any heiresses this year. If she won't wait till I'm rich like her, she can go to thunder."

Chilkoot wagged his head solemnly at the invalid.

"In a way that's right foolish, son," he said mildly. "But yet, in another way of looking at it, I don't know but you've got the right of it. Yes, sir; I guess maybe you have."

AT that moment a nurse brought two more visitors to Jack Henderson's room. They were a shrewd, pert-faced little woman who wore a fortune in furs, and a narrow-shouldered youth. They pounced on the invalid with eager cries of "Jack! Jack Henderson! Jack, you poor darling!"

Henderson turned over and grinned wanly.

"Hello, Fanny! And Tom, too. It was nice of you to come see me."

"I had to come to Circle to see my lawyer, anyway," Fanny exclaimed. "But I'd have come from Ransom any time, if I had known before."

She stooped over and bestowed a kiss upon Henderson.

Henderson grinned at Tom.

"Have any luck in the big stampede, kid?"

"Two frozen feet," Tom grinned back. "Been laid up most of the time since, thawing out. My dogs got in a jam with another sled fifteen miles out of camp. Then that blizzard hit, and it finished me. I'm lucky I'm alive."

"Tough," Henderson agreed. "But there's more gold in Alaska. You and I will have to go looking for it soon."

"Not for me," Tom Bacon announced instantly. "I'm cured, now and forever. I'm on my way Outside and I'm going to college next fall. Fanny and I figure some education wouldn't hurt me any."

Henderson looked his surprise.

Tom explained, "Fanny's going to make out pretty well with Louis' estate. Louis didn't leave a will, so the lawyer says she gets half what he owns." He added mysteriously and importantly, "But it's not Fanny's money that's going to pay my way. No, sir. I've got some news for you, Jack."

"What news?" Henderson asked, trying to seem interested, but with all his thoughts centered remorsefully on Betty Ladue.

Tom grinned.

"Remember Hardluck Billy Harrison?"

"Oh, yes; sure! How is he?"

"He's rich," said Tom. "Struck paydirt that's as rich as Sugar Creek."

"No? That so? Good for Billy!"

"Don't seem to excite him any," Tom observed, winking at his smiling sister.

"Not a bit," Fanny agreed.

"I said I was glad to hear it, Tom."

"But you never asked where he struck it.

It was on Craw Creek, Jack! It was on Number Ten above, and that's the claim just below Number Eleven above! Jack, Jack you darned idiot, we're both rich. You bought half that claim from me the night I was in a jam. And it turned out the richest ground in this district. Don't you get it? You're rich. You and me, together."

Henderson's mouth opened wide. His eyes were wide, too.

"Hardluck Billy muffed it on his first prospects," Tom went on breathlessly. "The old fool had had so much hard luck he didn't expect anything better. He never went down to hardpan, and the gold lies deep along there. He missed it until some of the other claims on Craw began to prove up. Then he prospected his claim and mine and they're rotten with gold. Now, you crazy galoot, have you got it into your thick skull that you're a rich man?"

Jack Henderson sat up in bed. He fixed his eye commandingly upon Chilkoot, who had lingered to hear.

"You go find Betty," he ordered. "Go find her and tell her she's got to come here, hot-foot. If she won't come, you carry her back. And if you don't make it soon, I'll get up and put on my pants and find her myself."

He turned on his wondering visitors.

"I'm glad you came," he said tremuluously. "I'm real glad. Glad you're all doing fine. And I certainly thank you, Tom, for that news. And now you'll have to excuse me. The minute Betty Ladue comes in this room I want every last one of you to get out and stay away. What I've got to say to her is our business, and nobody else's."

THE ice had not yet broken in the Yukon, but the break was expected soon. Interest in the Circle City pool in which every contributor entered his guess as to the exact hour and minute of the break, was growing feverish. Yet the ice held and a team of dogs could still travel over the softening snow.

Jack Henderson and his bride of two weeks were on their way to Craw Creek to look over the claim that would make him rich. Five miles beyond Circle Henderson *whoaed* his dogs and looked about him with lively interest.

"It must have been just about here, Betty!"

Betty moved closer to him, her cheek against his shoulder. She shivered at a memory.

"It's just a miracle that Eadie didn't kill you. Oh, Jack!"

"He paid for it," Henderson said soberly. "The poor devil paid worse than I would have made him. It must have been Wolf that attacked him. Wolf always went mad when he saw Louis. And he's the only dog not accounted for."

Henderson shook his head at that and sighed.

"I'd like to know what became of Wolf! Froze to death, I suppose. He was one grand dog."

The scene of that fight with Eadie held only saddening memories. Henderson shouted at his dogs and drew away from it again.

Across the ice, on the farther bank, another living thing had spied the dog sled and it stood with stiffening legs, pointed ears cocked alertly while it sniffed the wind.

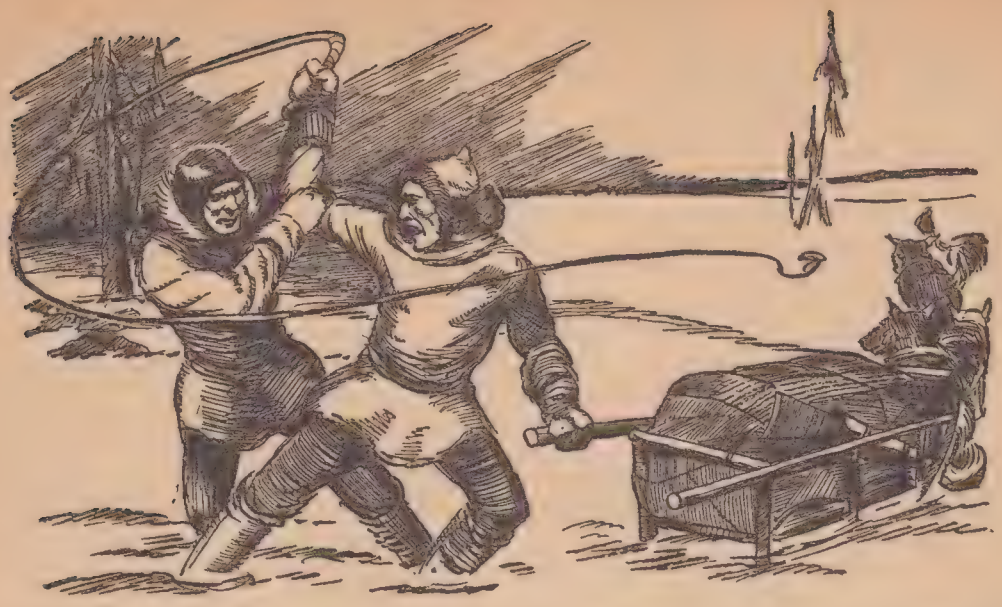
It was a gaunt, gray wolflike dog that still wore a battered collar and trailed from it a scrap of frayed-out haulrope. It was Wolf, the outlaw, who had lived by his wits and the half forgotten cunning of his wild blood, ever since that bitter day.

Wolf sniffed the wind now, as he had whenever an outfit passed up or down the Yukon. What the wind told him brought an answering yelp of delight from the big gray dog.

The sled and dogs were far away now, fast-moving little specks against the glaring snow, but Wolf knew them. He had caught the scent and knew that one of those distant little dots of black was The Man.

Four padded feet spurned the ground simultaneously. The lank, gaunt, gray body launched itself into a run that could laugh at miles. The sled was going fast, but Wolf was going faster and as he sped he uttered short, sharp, joyous cries that told of a heart overflowing with happy excitement.

He had found The Man again. He was going soon to overtake him and they would never part while he had life under the shaggy gray coat.



True, gripping experiences of men and women who have blazed new trails and old on the great Northern frontier. This story is told by a man who has been there and seen.

Devil of the Barrens

(Trail Tale)

By OWEN FINBAR

TWO men, clad in frosted deerskins, loped behind a dog team across the bitter face of Canada's Barren Lands. One of the runners was to die before Fort Reliance was reached, far to the south.

That was away back before the World War, and I had been prospecting along the Arctic coast for several years. Two rival companies had men scattered out all over that bitter terrain, and as it so happened another prospector and myself had found a rich copper vein at about the same time. The next thing was to record the claim for the company; to get to the nearest mining recorder's office, 3,000 miles away, and file the record. The first man in would naturally stand ace high with his outfit and also capture the $5,000 reward which each group of financiers had offered for definite proof of copper.

Sam Carney, who was racing me to the "outside," had elected to take the longer and safer journey by steamer, through the Behring straits and down along the Alaskan coast. I knew that if I could cross the Barrens, directly south and hit the settlements on the Great Slave Lake, that I could reach the mining recorder's office in Edmonton a good month before he could.

This was a big chance but I decided to take it; I wanted that $5,000. In those days money came easily and went quickly. Still I figured that once I hit the bright lights I could manage to make it last out a few weeks anyhow. Like a lot of the other men in the Far North I was hungering for a warm room, clothes that were made out of something besides skins, women's voices, and all that goes to make up civilization.

All the traders on Coronation Gulf said I was crazy to try to cross the Barrens and apparently the Eskimos thought so too. At any rate, I could not hire a dog

team for love or money, and there was no use buying one, because on a trip like that a man must have company or he won't win through.

Sergeant Scar of the Mounted Police finally fixed the matter to both his satisfaction and mine. There was an Eskimo on the coast named Yakut, who was giving the police a lot of trouble, although they could fix nothing on him. He was credited with several killings, and was a past master in the gentle art of wife snatching.

Scar wanted to get rid of him, and wished him on to me. The Mountie told the Eskimo 'breed that he could either take a waltz over the Barrens or he'd stick him in the jug. Yakut decided to ramble, but we were not out from the Gulf more than a week when I was beginning to wish that I had gone round on the steamer with Sam Carney.

We had to make time to beat Sam and I decided to travel light. Therefore, we took nothing but some grub, sleeping bags and so on, even leaving the rifles behind to lighten the load.

But when Yakut's slant eyes rolled to me again and again in cold speculation, I wished right heartily that I had not been such a fool. I was beginning to understand that the half-breed was not making the trip for pay and that so far as I was concerned it was only a matter of when and how I should be killed.

I reasoned the thing out from all angles and finally decided why I was marked. Yakut was after my surveyor's instruments, the little oil stove and the camp gear. If he could become possessed of these he would be a big man among the Innuits. Money didn't count with them; they did not understand what it was.

Yakut already had three wives, but he was after another girl, and when the man's eyes roved me day after day, I came to know that if there was an oil stove for presentation to Koola's father, that the wedding bells would ring out merrily. It was quite simple. Life in the Arctic is like that. You take what you want.

But how did the Eskimo figure on killing me? I asked myself that question a hundred times as we loped on, heads down against the searing wind. The People of the Ice had learned from the Mounted Police that the white man demanded an eye for an eye. Yakut had killed before, and he would be too wise to leave any trace.

So it went day after day, each man watching the other; food and warmth being secondary matters.

"YAI!"

The driver stilled his cruel whip for a moment one afternoon, pointing to the sky. It was still steely-blue, but the wind was rising. One of those blinding, soul-searing blizzards was on the way. Still we had run through them before, but apparently Yakut had changed his mind about such things. Either that or he had figured that my time had arrived.

Without waiting for orders the Eskimo brought the team to a halt, threw the whip across to me, and sullenly wordless as ever, commenced cutting blocks of frozen snow to build an *igloo*.

I looked at the whip and then at the huskies, and they were certainly as wicked a bunch of half-wolves as I had ever seen north of the Athabasca. Still, they knew what a whip meant. Yakut had drilled them in that, and it was enough to raise that whalebone handle to set the whole pack of devils whimpering in mortal fear. But a man can't very well swing a whip while he is unhitching.

"Damned if I'll unhitch those brutes," I told myself.

Just at that moment I remembered that they had killed two children at Innoyktok bay. Why, if I happened to stumble, I'd have the whole fifteen of them on my back.

My eyes went to Yakut's tousled shock of black hair, and just at that moment he looked up from his snow cutting and our eyes met. With that glance sudden illumination swept across my mind. Yakut was going to let the dogs do it! Clever, by God! There would be no bones marred by a knife mark. Just another traveler killed by huskies. The Eskimo could easily explain that to the Mounties.

The dogs were sitting in a semi-circle, gazing at us; wolfish ears pricked, jaws slavering. I laughed harshly, and the half-breed's face clouded in understanding. I backed away, still facing the team, threw down the whip and ordered Yakut to unhitch.

The Eskimo's oblique eyes glittered, but his moon face was impassive under the

frosted rim of his parka. He merely grunted and went on cutting more blocks. When the *igloo* was completed I crawled inside, made sure that my knife was lying snugly against my hip and lighted the life-giving little oil stove.

That night we ate a supper of half-thawed beans, eying each other across the little blue flame that filled the dripping snow walls with dancing shadows.

Afterward the damp skin clothing was hung up to dry. Then, stripped naked, we crept shiveringly into the fur sleeping bag and huddled down with our bare backs together for warmth.

SEVENTEEN aching days and watchful nights brought us to the edge of the timber line, where it showed as a blue-black smudge far to the south. Unless the compass had lied, we were within sight of Artillery Lake, and somewhere along its shores nestled the huddle of log cabins known as Fort Reliance. From there to the Great Slave Lake it was only a matter of a few days' mushing, and from the lake south there would be a well-beaten trail right to the railway at Fort McMurray.

Yakut stopped his gaunt dogs two hours before dusk in spite of my protestations that we could probably make it into the Fort that night. I sensed that threats were useless. The half-breed had no intention of reaching Reliance. The time had come!

"It's going to be tonight!" my brain warned me again after the *igloo* was made.

For some days the Eskimo had been feeding his dogs very lightly, but this night he did not feed them at all, although there was still fish in the feeding bags. The whole fifteen of the starving brutes sat round the *igloo* in a circle and howled when the smell of cooking food reached their nostrils.

Again we stripped to the hide and crowded into the sleeping bag, back to back. Before I settled down I stuck my knife in the snow, and only then I noticed that the bed had been placed unusually close to the snow walls, so that my shoulder almost touched it.

There was a bright moon outside which made the snow balls almost transparent after a time. I was dropping off into a half-doze, but was suddenly jarred wide awake. My skin prickled all over and beads of cold sweat stood out on my body when a faint scratching sounded from outside.

When my eyes became better accustomed to the half light, I saw that one of the hunger-maddened dogs was scraping a passage through the snow walls—less than two feet away from me!

Without disturbing the heavily breathing Eskimo, I grabbed my knife and carefully estimated the distance between myself and the furry shape outside.

Gathering all my muscles for the attempt, I drove the knife through the snow wall, slashing the huskie across the snout.

At once the night was split by a howl of agony and in answer to it ferocious, shaggy shapes appeared from all directions.

Yelling commands in the Puvalik tongue, Yakut crowded into his deerskins and disappeared into the raging night. The air was filled with guttural exclamations as the Eskimo searched the *komatik* for the whip.

He did not find it. My life depended on that whip and I had hidden it with especial care!

Then new sounds were added to the conflict when Yakut grabbed the camp ax that was thrust through the sled lashings. I knew afterward that with the courage of his kind he had leaped into that jumble of flagging tails, shaggy backs and darting heads.

But the ax was not the dreaded whip. The huskies knew that.

More horrid noises sounded, pierced all at once by Yakut's scream.

The following morning I dug the whip out of a snow drift and headed for the timber, and before I had been away from the *igloo* a couple of hours I saw wood smoke filtering up into the thin air.

McNare, post manager for the big company at Reliance, helped me shoot the remaining dogs and bury what was left of Yakut under a pile of fire-loosened boulders.

I filed my copper claim in Edmonton a full two weeks before Sam Carney landed at Vancouver off the Hudson's Bay steamer. I was on the wharf when the boat tied up and I'm here to tell the world that if anyone wants help in the scattering of five thousand bucks Sam Carney is the gentleman to get in touch with!

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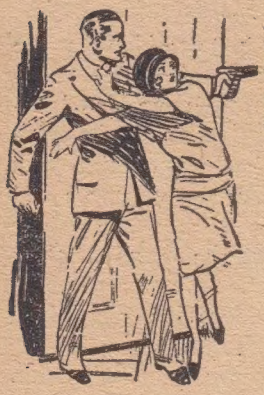

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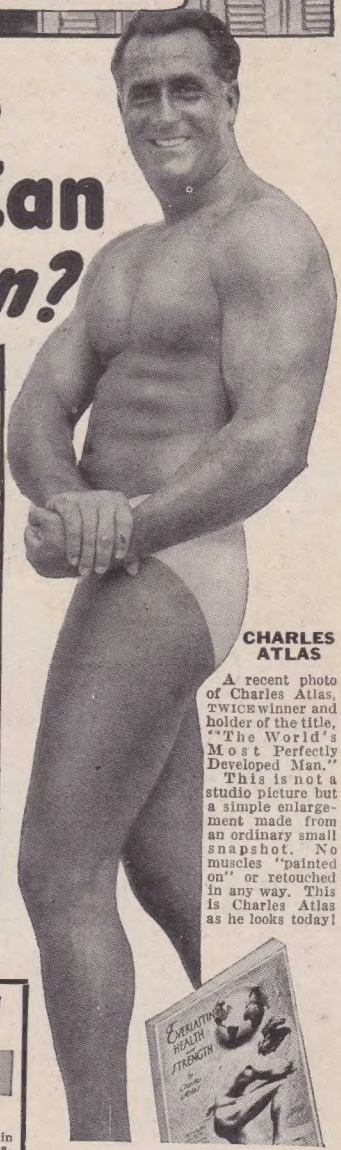

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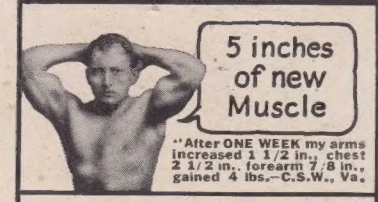

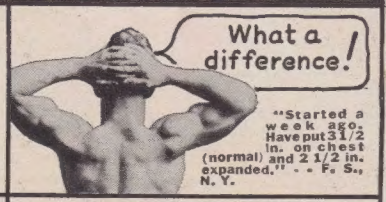

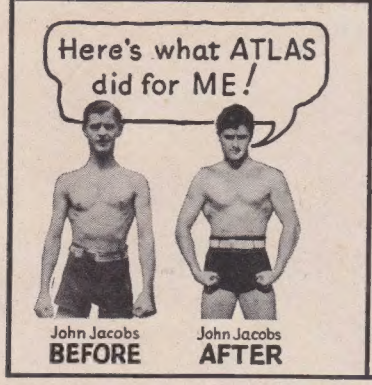

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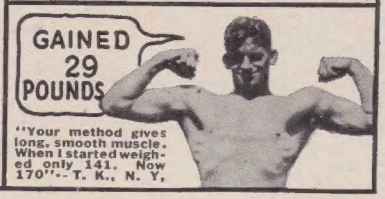

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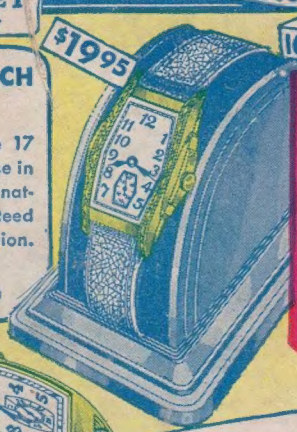

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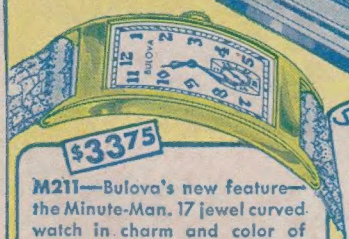

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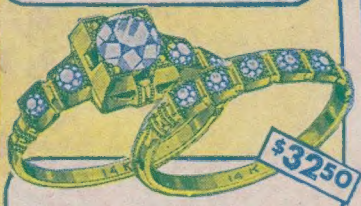

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